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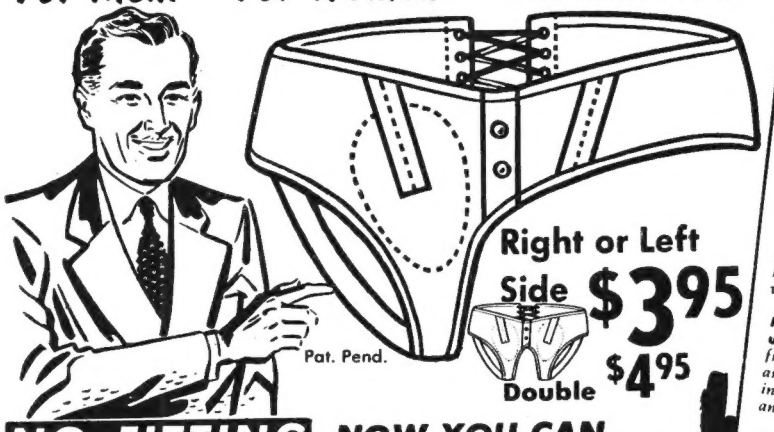

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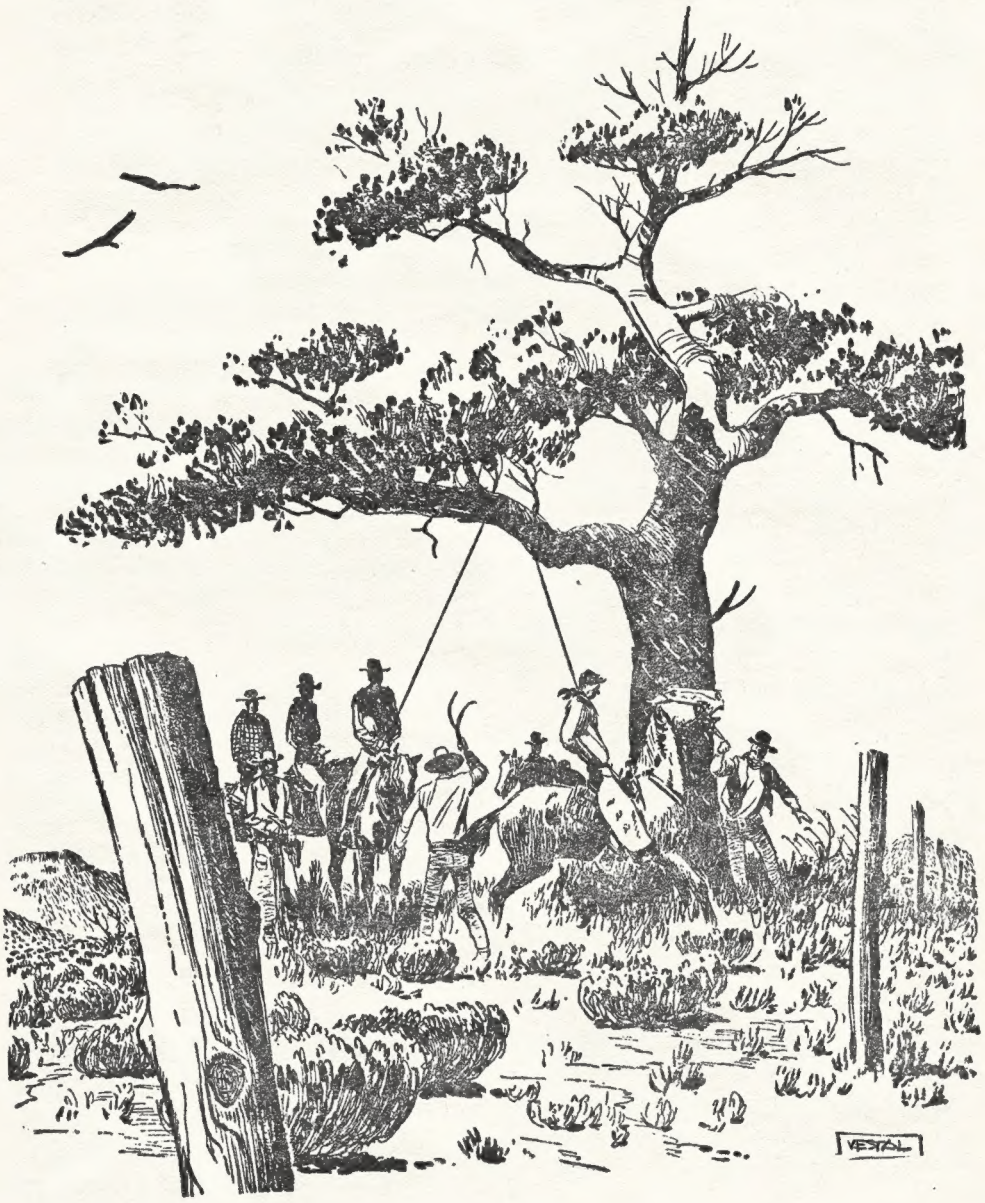
THE HANGING HILLS

BY BRAD WARD



THE HANGING HILLS

BY BRAD WARD

His violence-filled border days were behind Adam White, the gringo adventurer. And the trail between Mexico and Montana was long and tortuous. But an Owlhoot rep is tough to shed when holsters are tied neat for six-gun trouble.

SEVERAL thousand miles distance and more than a year in time lay behind Adam White the morning he awoke in Virgil, Montana. But more than distance and time separated him from the border life he had known; there was the change in himself. It lay in deeper things than the fact that he had put on weight and lost the deep desert tan from his face. He had slept the night through in a bed, and no gun lay within his reach. How long had it been since he could allow himself such relaxations? He grinned and stretched his long length in bed. He closed his eyes slowly, letting memories seep in.

Just a little more than a year since that last desperate run across the border, with the Mexican general's raggle-taggle cavalry pounding along behind him with murder on their minds, a damned good chance that ahead of him the Rangers would be waiting. His grin widened at the memory, at the sharpness of it, for the year of idleness had not erased one moment of his border years from his mind. Still, he could remember without regret saving for only one thing—that his three compañeros, Toby Blake, Cud Way and Andy Bright, had not chosen to come with him to this new life he was determined to begin.

Toby Blake, big, bluff, his reddened face half hidden by monstrous mustaches, had spat brown fluid to one side, shaking his grizzled head. "Nope, Adam," he said with an air of sad finality, "I reckon it just ain't in the cards. Once we shake General Aguilar's buzzards from our tails an' start tastin' the dust o' Texas again—that'll be it. For me an' Cud an' Andy, I reckon Del Rio will do until we find somethin' ornery enough to set our hands to. For you—well, I hope you find what you want, Adam, because it ain't many fellers like us that does!"

There had been no time for farewells that dust-hazed morning. Beneath Adam White his tall horse ran with the steady, mile-eating stride of the desert-bred animal. Then the muddy streak of the Rio Grande reflected sunlight ahead, and the Mexican guerrillas voiced their angry disappointment over the outcome of the long race. Bullets whistled and sang harmlessly over their heads, then White and his men were on the long down slant to the river, and Aguilar's rebels reined in with futile shouted curses. At an easier gait, then, the three Americans had ridden the rest of the way. They rode in silence, each with his own memories uppermost in mind. For Adam White, it meant the end of a part of his life, the end of the turbulent, violence-filled border days. No more the wild

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THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO WESTERN BOOKS WILL BE ON SALE AT NEWSSTANDS ON OCT. 1, 1952

The three masked gunnies caught them unprepared at the crest of the trail.

rumors of battles in revolution-torn Mexico. El Blanco, the gringo adventurer who traded American rifles for Mexican gold, would exist no more; but Adam White with a fat balance in a New York bank, would start a new life.

White put his horse to the river. Blake and the other two rode beside him. It was the last crossing they would make together. "Old Muddy," White said. "A mile wide, a foot deep; too thick to drink, too thin to plow. I'm going where a river is water, and there aren't any guns barking welcome when you cross. Adios!"

And more than a farewell to the turgid, sleepy river that had played so large a part in his past years, it was a farewell to a way of life and to his three comrades who had shared it. No goodbyes were spoken, as if by mutual consent. With a wave of the hand, Toby Blake and Cud Way and Andy Bright reined apart, galloped away, the dust closing slowly in behind them, leaving Adam White alone . . .

HE OPENED his eyes and stretched once more, forcing the memories away. No time for that now! He shook his head as if to clear it. Until yesterday, Montana had proven a disappointment to him. The early summer sun was hot and the land was arid. Four days he had ridden the jolting, rattling train across the country, through the richly cultivated flatlands of the Midwest, into the barren sweeps of the Northern desert. But yesterday he had witnessed a dramatic change.

The distant mountains had suddenly thrust close, blue and dark, and more than one towering peak crowned with snow. The scent of pine and juniper replaced the dry acridity of dust, and the reaching forests crept down the mountain flanks to border the railroad. The upward grade seemed never to end, once begun, and slowly the spell of the mountains fastened upon him. Virgil, where White left the train, was not greatly different from any other frontier town.

Sheep and cattle pens lined the tracks for a mile, and the train swept past bunched sheep, dust hanging over them, cursing, sweating riders hard at work, herding them into loading chutes. The acrid smell of the yards permeated the little town, but it was a good smell to Adam White, for behind it he could sense the rich sweetness of water and trees. Water; here there was an abundance of it.

A hundred small streams they crossed, and once when the train roared over a wooden trestle that seemed suspended on nothingness, far below the rocky gorge roared a mighty river. The Cattleman's Hotel was an imposing new structure of red brick, and others were completed and being erected. Growth and industry; that was the keynote of the town. The sleepy atmosphere of the southern states was missing. It was a raw growth, too; the night before Adam White had been awakened by gunfire in the streets, and the yowling of cowboys. He grinned as he sat up on the edge of the bed.

"High, Wide and Handsome!" he said. "They don't miss it far!"

He sensed the challenge that Montana offered him, and accepted it. The year he had spent in the East he did not regret, for he had promised it to himself. It had marked the end of El Blanco and the beginning of the Adam White he was only now beginning to know and understand.

He washed, shaved, and then regarded the face that stared at him from the mirror. It was not a gentle face, for the hardships and dangers of the border had placed their indelible stamp upon him; but they were softened, muted now. The harsh angles had filled out, and the first touch of silver lay over each temple.

"You ugly buzzard!" he snorted. "Who'll ever mistake you for an honest-to-Goodness gent?"

He dressed with care, and finally knotted a black shoestring tie about his throat and donned his vest and coat. From the small, cracked mirror the reflection was that of a business man, with a deft touch of the dandy. Nothing of the plainsman, the rider of lone trails, remained.

In his open traveling bag the pearl-handled butts of two revolvers thrust up from a worn leather cartridge belt. For a moment he considered them, then grinned and shut the case. It was his final departure from the character of El Blanco. He descended the red-carpeted stairs and left the bag at the desk. The clerk nodded at his question. The stage for Medicine Bend would leave at noon. White thanked the

man, crossed the ornate lobby and entered the dining room. That early it was almost empty.

He chose a table to one side, ordered ham and eggs, and a pot of coffee while he waited. Two women came into the dining room and took a table a short distance from him. They were both well-dressed, both young, and both of eye-catching beauty. For a moment the red-haired girl's eyes met his, and he thought they widened, then decided he must be mistaken. The other girl caught his attention. She was not over twenty-two, tall and slender, with a regal carriage. Her face was oval, with the odd amber eyes of the true honey-blonde. She was smiling as she spoke to the other girl. For a moment her eyes caught his upon her face. A flush mantled her cheeks before she looked deliberately away.

IN SUDDEN confusion, White dropped his eyes to the table. Damn it! Why had he stared? Impatient with himself for his unconscious breach of manners, he drew a letter from his wallet, opened it. A small newspaper clipping was inside the folded letter. He read it with a renewal of the interest that had claimed him when first he had seen it.

For Sale: Montana Ranch, 35,000 choice acres, cattle, sheep. Inquire of Morgan Properties. Medicine Bend, Montana.

The letter itself was from the Morgan Bank, Medicine Bend, thanking him for the deposit he had sent, assuring him of the interest and assistance of one Joseph Candley Morgan. The signature was a bold, giant scrawl. A grin tugged at the corners of his wide mouth, then he looked up to find the red-haired girl staring at him. Once more the sense of familiarity struck him, then faded. She looked quickly away.

His breakfast came then, and he forgot the girls, the letter, and ate with a hearty appetite. He finished, lighted a cigar, leaned back. Once more his eyes met the hazel-green eyes of the titian-haired girl across the way, and she did not look away. Sudden electric shock tingled his nerves. He knew her. That was all. A sense of remembrance, incomplete, hazy. But he had seen her before. Then the two girls got up, and neither looked his way as they left. Puzzled, Adam shook his head.

He finished his coffee, stood up. The waitress was suddenly there. She was smiling as she held out a piece of paper torn from a menu.

"The lady said to give you this, sir."

White hesitated, then took the paper. "Which lady?"

"The lady with the red hair, sir," the woman answered.

Adam felt a vague sense of disappointment. He gave the woman a half-dollar, thanked her. Scrawled in pencil on the scrap of paper was a brief note: *Don't you know me, Adam? I must see you. Room 313. I'll be alone.* There was no signature. He frowned, stared through the doorway across the lobby, but the two girls were gone. No, wait—he saw the tall, slender form crowned by honey-gold hair moving toward the street. She was alone.

He found room 313 without trouble. He knocked softly.

"Come in!" A strangely familiar voice called out. He opened the door. The girl stood before the red-draped windows, half-turned toward him. Her smile widened.

"Adam!" Across the room she came, into his arms, and kissed him. The soft warmth of her lips caught him off-guard and for a moment his arms tightened about her, then he relaxed them and she stepped back.

Her face was small, delicate, with a trace of sadness about the eyes, and a wistful longing to the red lips. She laughed, suddenly, liltingly. "Adam White, you don't know me!" she gasped. "I should be angry, hurt, but I'm not! I count it a compliment to both of us."

His complete bewilderment showed in his face and she laughed again. "Howdy, El Blanco!" she whispered.

His lean figure stiffened and his face went hard. "Who are you?"

She shook her head, her smile strong. "Almost, almost I was afraid I'd made a mistake. But I couldn't be wrong about you. Now you look as I remembered you. I knew you only for a brief time—but long enough to change my life. Don't you remember?"

The sadness of the hazel-green eyes, the softness of the full lips. . . . He shook his head.

"Come over here and sit beside me," she said, leading the way to a sofa. "Adam, I know you didn't recognize me, didn't remember. But I couldn't count on your not remembering later. We were bound to meet again, so I had to talk to you first." As she spoke, remembrance came slowly. Her voice, whispering. . . . "Adam, you knew me as Molly Dunne. My real name is Madelon Drake, and I'm not ashamed to use it now. Molly Dunne. In Laredo—remember?"

He tried to think; the name was familiar, hauntingly. He had heard it before, a long time before. He shook his head finally.

"That's a poor compliment to a girl you befriended when no one else would," she said. Her face tautened. "I'd been in Laredo a month, a month of hell! And one night you came to the dance hall where I worked. You were hurt, something had happened to someone you loved, I think. A boy. You sat alone, and you were very drunk. Like a man drinking to forget."

He remembered suddenly. A dingy dive, a girl in a tawdry spangled dress, with flame-red hair that shone through the smoky haze. The sadness of her face had cut through him. "My God!" he breathed. "I do remember."

She nodded almost regretfully. "I knew you would. There was a man, one who had driven me almost crazy, hounding me. He struck me. You called him out. You beat him with your fists, drove him away. Then you turned to me, and your eyes were blazing hells of hate. 'Get out of this!' you snarled. 'Get your clothes, you're leaving!' You gave me money, how much I never dreamed until I counted it later, saw me on the first train. You told me who you were, that you were going to leave that wild life behind you one day, and that I could do as much. I couldn't even thank you then but I want you to know I—I never went back to that life. I got a job in Chicago."

His smile came slowly, and he gripped her hand hard. "That's all the thanks any man would need."

Her eyes were bright, clear. "I knew you meant what you said. I felt it inside of you when you spoke. Because of that I couldn't let you down. Do you understand that?"

He nodded. "I think I do."

Suddenly she was in his arms, crying. "But I've got to hurry. Marjorie, the girl I was with, wanted to do some shopping before the stage left. We're going on to Medicine Bend together. We met on the train from Chicago. Medicine Bend is her home; she's been away to school. She'll be back in a few minutes. But I had to see you, talk to you." She sobered, suddenly. Her hazel-green eyes were appealing. "Adam—I couldn't go back to my family. It was too late. I made my own way. Then I met a man. He's a rancher. He was in Chicago bringing sheep in to market. He—he liked me. We wrote often. I'm going to Medicine Bend now to marry him."

"I'm glad of that!" Adam said. "I'm glad for your sake."

"I meant to tell him before we were married but it's going to be hard. I was afraid you'd give me away—"

He shook his head. "I never saw Miss Madelon Drake before in my life. It's best that way. I've burned my bridges behind me, but cowhands ride long trails, and I've seen more than one Texan up here. Someone might know me; so it's best that we don't see each other again."

She closed her eyes. "Thank you, Adam. Then this will be hello and goodbye."

He took her hand, stood up. "I said goodbye to Molly Dunne down in Laredo years ago. Maybe someday I'll earn the right to say hello to Miss Madelon Drake. Until then—adios!"

"Goodbye, Adam White," she whispered, and stood on tiptoes to kiss him again.

As he went back downstairs, he frowned. What had Molly said was the name of the other girl? The girl with honey-blonde hair. Marjorie. Marjorie. Amber eyes, and straight dark brows, and a thin patrician smile. The kind of a girl a man could trust to ride beside him. . . .

"Rattlesnakes!" he ejaculated. "I haven't had a woman on my mind in ten years and now I'm thinking about two of 'em!"

II

WITH two hours to kill before the stage would be ready, Adam White left the hotel and walked down the dusty main street of Virgil, viewing the town with a growing interest. At the stock pens he stopped and watched a group of dust-

covered riders urging cattle through a counting chute. One of the riders, a short, slim man of uncertain age, waved a hand. White returned the greeting. With the last of the cattle in the chute, the rider swung down from his mount, beat his battered sombrero against his dusty Levis.

"Howdy, stranger," he greeted White. "Interested in cattle?"

"I'm not a buyer if that's what you mean," White returned. "Just passing through."

"Oh." Sand-colored eyes opened. "Shore, I thought you was one o' Joe Morgan's buyers. Seems like they's a new one every month or so."

"Morgan?" White felt a sudden interest. The man he had sent his check to for a deposit on the Medicine Bend ranch was named Joseph Morgan.

The rider grinned. "Yep. Joe Morgan's the bigwig in these parts. Buyin', sellin', tradin'. You name it an' Joe Morgan owns it."

White nodded. "That's been dusty work. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Hell, I ain't never said no. But me'n Skinny there are pards."

"Bring him along." White was glad to avail himself of an opportunity to learn something of this new land.

Skinny was a sad-eyed cowhand in a checkered shirt who came up at the other rider's call. "My name's Skeeter Jones. This's Skinny Tolver. We got our own spread over ahind Bald Mountain. Ain't much but we kin ship a hundred head this year."

"Sounds good to me," White replied, honestly. His proffered hand was taken with brash heartiness. "My name's Adam White. I'm in Virgil on a stop-over."

"Between trains, huh?" Jones nodded. White didn't bother to correct the wrong impression he had given. The Drover's Saloon was half-empty as they entered. White had yet an hour before noon.

"Here's dust in yore eye, Mister White!" Jones said, and downed his whiskey straight. Tolver followed suit. Jones blinked, then nodded benevolently. "Yep, Mister Joe Morgan's got the whole Medicine Bend territory in the palm o' his hand. I ain't big enough to bother him, so we gets along, him an' me."

"Morgan." Tolver spat the name out. His eyes were mean.

"Skinny here don't take none to Morgan," Jones put in. "He used to work for Drag Hanson, ramrod o' the Pine Tree, one o' Morgan's spreads."

The Pine Tree was the ranch White was intending to buy. He laid a pair of silver dollars on the bar. The bartender refilled the three glasses.

"Mister," Jones said, "Maybe I'm talkin' out o' turn but if there's any talkin' done in Virgil or Medicine Bend yuh can bet yore shirt it's about Joe Morgan in some way. Like today. I met Jim Halgreave from over to Mercer's Ridge. He tells me Morgan's got hisself another sucker for the Pine Tree. That's a laugh!"

Adam felt his hand tighten around his whiskey glass. "How do you mean?" he asked trying to make his voice casual.

"Skeeter, shut up!" Tolver barked. His eyes were fixed to Adam's face. "Mister White, Skeeter's plumb out o' his head. We was hittin' the high spots last night an' I reckon it ain't wore off."

Skeeter Jones turned, stared at Tolver, then back to White. He blinked. Sudden thought seemed to overwhelm him. " 'Scuse me," he said, soberly. "I talk too damn' much!"

Tolver said: "We got to get back. Thanks for the drinks."

"Any time," White returned. He watched them go, his eyes narrowed, then he shrugged. Maybe it was just cowboy talk. Maybe —but the thin coldness in his head, was like the splash of cold water in his face. The jubilant mood of the morning was suddenly dispelled, replaced by an inner tension he could not deny.

THE STAGE was drawn up in front of the hotel when Adam left the saloon. He saw the two girls climb into the coach. He crossed the street. The stagecoach driver, a heavy-set man with walrus mustaches, wearing a dust coat and gloves, spat to one side as White came up.

"We're waitin' on you, Mister!" he called out. "Get aboard!"

A small man dressed in a Prince Albert lugging an enormous carpet-bag, came running down the street. "Hey, wait for me!" he called.

"Okay, Doc!" The fat driver grinned. He moved around the coach and began to untie the lacings of the luggage boot. White passed him, went into the hotel, retrieved his suitcase. The fat man took it, tossed it in, closed the canvas flaps. He grinned widely. "Okay, let's go! Inside or out?"

White felt Molly Dunne's stare on his face. He avoided looking at her, and was reluctant to spend the long hours of the journey close to her. "I'll get up with you," he told the driver.

"Shore 'nuff. Ain't carryin' no shotgun guard this trip."

White climbed up to the spring seat atop the stage. The heavy man groaned as he swung up beside him, unwrapped the four-in-hand reins from the brake rod. His booted foot kicked the brake free.

"Hyuh!" he shouted, and the sudden lurch of the team brought a startled cry from the girls. White braced himself. The driver glanced at him, spat over the side. "Every man fer hisself!" he cackled. The long whip cracked, and the team took stride. With a shuddering, swaying motion, the stage moved out.

Through the town of Virgil they rolled, jolting and jouncing, past the long bare outlines of the loading pens, past bawling herds and hard-driven herders. White saw Skeeter Jones and Skinny Tolver riding to one side glance up sharply as they recognized him. He waved a hand and grinned.

"Know them fellers?" The driver drawled, and without waiting for a reply, went on: "That's Jones an' Tolver. Right nice fellers but fixin' to reap a peck o' trouble one o' these days."

"Why?" White demanded.

The driver stared at White. "Newcomer, hain't yuh? Yuh'll find out soon enough if'n you stick aroun' this neck o' the woods. This is Morgan's Empire, all o' it, an' little hangers-on like Jones an' Tolver ain't welcome. They hain't been no burr in his side yet but they been talkin' loud an' frequent, an' Morgan don't like that none."

For the first time White wished he had strapped on his guns. He felt suddenly naked without them. "Just who is this Morgan?"

The driver grinned. "Hell, he's everybody, Joe Morgan is! Reckon he owns half o' Montanny. He's gettin' on now. I heerd oncet he was in with the Plummer outfit in Virginia City; that he was the real power ahind Plummer. But it's shore they weren't no vigilantes after *him!* Reckon they ain't nobody goin' to tell Joe Morgan to his ugly face what they think o' him—not an' come away unskinned. He's hell on wheels with a gun an' with his fists, an' now that he's gettin' too old to enjoy that sort o' ruckus, he's hired hisself a crew that takes care o' sich matters for him. But yuh got to give the ol' galoot credit; he's outlasted everybody else, an' it don't look like nobody is goin' to buck him now! He'll die in bed with his boots off, will Joe Morgan; 'cause he's just too damn' mean for anybody to do anythin' about it!"

He broke off to wheel the team into a sideroad. A stand of oak lined one side, and down a long lane was a sun-silvered ranchhouse. A man was plowing in a field beyond.

"Git up thar, goldang yuh!" the driver roared, and his whip snaked out with a report like the crack of lightning. He chortled suddenly. "Yuh wouldn't think, young feller, that an old hunk o' granite like Joe Morgan would wind up with a critter like that for a daughter, now would yuh?" He kept grinning. "I seen yuh throwin' calf's eyes at Marjorie Morgan an' I cain't say I blame yuh, stranger."

Honey-gold hair and the bearing of a queen. The odd amber eyes flashing as she spoke to Molly Dunne. The daughter of Joseph Morgan of Morgan's Empire! For a moment White was rigid with surprise, then a mocking grin twisted his mouth. "What am I riding into in these black mountains?" he wondered silently.

"T'other one's a looker, too," the driver went on. "Name o' Drake. She's come clear from Chicaggy to marry up with young Tom Selman. Reckon Selman's gettin' the best o' the bargain. Still he's got the Flyin' S Ranch, such as it is. How long he's goin' to keep it, what with buckin' Joe Morgan, is somethin' to wonder about. They's bad blood atween Morgan an' the Selmans, an' as far as young Tom's concerned, it's boilin' over."

The words rang in White's mind, but just then the horses ran at a building rise, and the driver stood up to exhort them on with whip and voice. The conversation was ended

by the sudden change in the terrain.

The road followed the natural conformation of the lower mountains, edging between lofty pinnacles of rock, sagging sharply down where the driver urged the horses into a run with loud shouts, only to burst upward once more. The grade was steep, and the rutted road uneven, pitching the coach alarmingly to either side, but the fat driver only grinned, chewed his cud of tobacco energetically, and drove the team on like a madman. They broke suddenly from the concealing arms of a pass, onto a ledge that ran sharply upward across the granite-gray rock slope. White's breath caught in his throat. On his side the slope dropped away for a thousand feet to end in a savage jumble of broken rock in the canyon depths. To either side the mountains soared upward, close, arresting in their grandeur, frightening in their immensity.

ONLY the momentum of the team and stagecoach kept them going up that steep slope it seemed. Then the sharp rise ended, and the driver pulled up the team on a level stretch where the roadway had been widened.

"Ten minutes to breathe the horses," announced the portly driver as he swung down. White sat still for a moment longer.

"Yuh better stretch yore legs, mister!" came the driver's booming advice. "It's a long spell to the Summit from here an' I ain't stoppin' again."

White climbed down.

A small, slender man, graying of hair, with steel-rimmed glasses perched on the end of a sharply pointed nose, was wiping his face with a red bandanna as White came down. The man nodded.

"How d'ye do, sir," he chirped in a thin voice. "I'm Doc Remus—Abel Remus, M. D., of Medicine Bend. I didn't have time to meet you before this confounded contraption started."

"My name's White, and I'm going to Medicine Bend on business," Adam replied. The small man's grasp was light, quick. Beyond him the two girls stood, staring out over the gorge.

"Business?" Remus echoed. "Either whiskey or cattle—ain't nothin' else would take a man to this God-forsaken part of nowhere. Me, I'm a horse doctor, physician and father confessor all rolled into one. In case you need any of the three, look me up."

Adam White found a growing liking for the small man. "I'm buying the Pine Tree Ranch. I don't know what I expected, but I don't mind telling you I've never seen a country I like better than this."

Doc Remus' eyes widened. "Pine Tree, huh? Damned if you look much like Joe Morgan's other prospects. But I'll repeat my offer. I'm a specialist in gunshot wounds, young feller. Had plenty of practice, and most of it from Pine Tree riders—or fellers they met up with sudden-like."

White's friendly grin widened. "That meant as a hunch for me, Doc?"

The little doctor grimaced. "Heaven forbid!" he barked. "There are two things only a damned fool would attempt: teach a mule tricks—and give advice to a Texan." He shook his head bird-like. "But being a stranger here you wouldn't know the ladies, an' the way you been starin' I reckon you must want to. I'll do the honors. Come along."

White followed Remus over to the rim. The girls turned as the two men came up.

"Marjorie, this feller's goin' to be in Medicine Bend. Like every other feller he's goin' to come moonin' around the prettiest single girl there, so I'll get him off to a good start. Adam White, this is Miss Marjorie Morgan. Her pa's the feller fixin' to sell you the Pine Tree."

The honey-blonde girl smiled. "How do you do, Mr. White? Don't pay any attention to Doc Remus. He's the biggest fibber in the Medicine Bend country." Molly was standing very still. Marjorie Morgan turned to her. "This is Miss Drake. She's marrying Tommy Selman from Medicine Bend. She's come all the way from Chicago. I made it a point to meet her there, and we've come all this way together. Tommy's a lucky man."

"I'm sure he is," White said. He took Molly's hand. "I'm glad to know you, Miss Drake."

"Time!" called the driver, bustling up. "Pile aboard!"

White excused himself, explaining he wanted to see something of the country he was making his new home, and returned to the seat beside the driver. Doc Remus squinted up at the coachman.

"You, Ben Davis, you take it easy, you hear?"

"Shore, Doc, I hear yuh!" the driver returned, then slapped the reins with a force that lurched the stage and sent the small doctor flying to his seat. Big Ben Davis grinned at White. "Nicest feller in Medicine Bend, Doc there—an' jist about the orneriest, too!"

Until that moment, White felt, he had not known what a mountain grade was. From where they stopped at Lookout Point, the narrow road shot in and up, through a craggy pass. The team slowed to a walk, and Davis urged them on with whip and voice. For White it was an experience he would never forget.

"Thar's the Summit!" Ben yelled above the grinding roar of the steel-tired wheels. "Seventy-five-hundred feet, an' from there it's downhill all the way."

The brown road wound up above them, cutting back and forth, to finally surge between two upright columns. Striata of yellow rock lined them. Like the portals of a mighty wall, the pass loomed.

Swaying, creaking, groaning in every timber, the stagecoach rolled on and soon White was sitting astride the backbone of the world, staring down into a wonderland of crazily tossed mountains and valleys.

The sun was lowering to the western hills, sending long shadows out into the canyon passages when the stage got going again. They broke abruptly from the divide, and the road angled sharply down below them. At points in the twisting passage, the lower turns of the mountain road were directly under them. But the cutbacks offered no problem to Davis' adroit handling of the team. He kept his foot on the brake, and the whip in his hand. The coach rocked and swayed, but having become accustomed to the wild gyrations of the coach, Adam was not worried.

A startled shout from Davis brought him erect. They were midway down the mountain grade, running between gigantic fallen rocks, and cracks in the hide of the mountain. Ahead a sharply defined *V* cut was outlined by the lighter sky behind it. With a slowing motion that pinned White's feet to the dashboards, and a mighty squealing of protesting leather brake shoes, they lurched down into the shadows. Before them a mighty boulder had fallen directly across the road.

Ben Davis' curses rang out. Then stopped with startling suddenness. Two men stood before the great boulder, rifles in their hands; to one side, atop the boulder, stood another, almost on eye-level with White atop the stage.

"What is this?" Adam demanded.

Ben Davis spat to one side disgustedly. "I don't know what you make of it, mister," he grunted. "But to me it looks like a holdup!"

III

"GET down from there. Line up in the road!" came the barked command. Davis spat again. "Better do what they say, mister," he urged. "Them fellers mean business. This's the fourth time this year they been layin' up here for the stage."

"You said it, Ben!" The man atop the great boulder growled. A black neckerchief over his mouth muffled his words. He motioned with the rifle. "Move!"

Adam swung down. Doc Remus and the girls were already out of the coach. The two men in front of the road block came beside the horses. Both were masked. With a clatter of falling rubble, the third bandit dropped into the roadbed.

A heavy shouldered man appeared to be the leader of the three outlaws. He took off his hat, held it in his hands. "Just drop in all cash an' valuables," he ordered. Doc Remus removed his wallet and threw it in. He pulled his watch from his vest.

"You can keep that iron ticker, Doc," the leader said. He faced White. "All right, mister, shell out."

Adam dropped in his wallet which held more than a hundred dollars in cash. His watch and fob followed. He tried to catch an identifying mark about the holdup men, but they were dressed nondescriptly in Levis, open-necked blue shirts, and dark vests. Their rifles were Winchesters, and black-handled Colts sagged at their hips. The driver dug deep and dropped a couple of silver dollars into the hat.

"I'm so damned broke from last time, I ain't got no more!" he complained. "You fellers makin' this a regular stop?"

The big outlaw guffawed. "Maybe so,

Ben." He came up to the two girls. "Well, now, looka-here! Say, I'm lucky today. Ladies, if'n you'll just toss in yore valuables—"

Madelon Drake shrugged. "I have fifty dollars in my purse. That's every cent I own."

"Yeah?" The bandit bowed, mockingly. "Now ain't that jist too bad? Toss it in!"

Marjorie Morgan's eyes flashed. "I won't do it!" she cried. "You can't do this!"

The outlaw focused his attention upon her. "Now can't I?" he rumbled. "Here, Joe, take this hat."

The second outlaw moved up. The big leader shook his head. "Now supposin' yuh pay off with a little kiss instead o' cash?" His hands shot out and grasped Marjorie. The girl screamed. White's hand caught the outlaw's shoulder and whirled him around. His right fist slammed against the black neckerchief. The heavier man went sprawling into the dust. The other bandit slammed the barrel of a rifle against White's head, and the dark shadows of the pass reeled crazily before him as he fell. He wasn't unconscious but his arms went rubbery. He could not push his weight up.

The bandit leader clambered to his feet and slammed the toe of his boot into White's side. The pain of the blow cleared his head, and a reddish haze seemed suspended like a curtain before him. He came to his feet in a lunge.

"Hold it, fella!" came a command. The third bandit had his rifle levelled. White stopped his charge. The big man came toward him and without warning his fist lashed out. White fell heavily.

The big outlaw laughed hoarsely. "All right, now, girl—" He started toward Marjorie again. White tried to get up, but the strength had gone from his body and his head was roaring with confusion. The third man's voice caught his attention.

"Lay off, Boss!" he warned, his voice pitched low. "That's Morgan's kid. I've seen her before."

"The hell you say?" The bigger man grunted. But the other's words held him in check. He did not return to the girl. "All right, get that box down off the stage, an' let's get out of here."

One of the outlaws climbed up on the stage, tossed down a small wooden box. White heard Davis groan. "You fellers don't miss a bet, do you?"

The big outlaw guffawed. "Not often, Ben," he answered. "We like you. Every time you stop you got a present for us." His voice deepened. "The rest of you pile back into that stage. Ben, there's room for you to wheel her around that rock. Get goin'!" He strode back to White, stood beside him. "As for you, mister, count yourself lucky I wasn't in a shootin' mood!"

Adam's jaws ached from the blows he had taken. He said nothing, but anger was a white heat inside him. Doc Remus came up, took his arm. The girls were in the stage. White stumbled as he climbed in, then the door slammed behind Doc Remus, and the stage pulled out with a slamming jerk. A rifle roared, then another, and the horses broke into a run.

White's head cleared slowly. Something soft dabbed at the blood on his mouth, then he felt a soft, cool hand on his forehead. The stage moved from the rocky pass into the bright sunshine. He saw Marjorie bent forward, her amber eyes shining with concern. He saw Madelon's face behind Marjorie, and he managed a smile. "I'm all right now." He turned to Doc Remus. "Does this happen every trip?"

"Damn' near, seems like," Remus replied. "You were just introduced—the hard way—to one of Montana's institutions, the mountain outlaw. I imagine it was Todd Krale and his men. The sheriff has been after him for months. This is the fourth time this year the Virgil stage has been held up. And every time Ben was carrying the Flying S payroll. Young lady, that's your young man, Tom Selman's spread. Seems like young Tom won't do business with Morgan's bank in Medicine Bend."

"Doc!" It was Marjorie, her face flushed. "You make it sound like father was behind Todd Krale and his outlaws!"

Doc Remus cocked his head. "Sure enough did, didn't I? Well that proves I'm as big a fool as the next feller. Joe Morgan's a he-wolf but I reckon he ain't no thief."

"A ranch payroll and no shotgun guard?" White frowned.

Remus nodded. "Sounds kind of queer, but it ain't when you know the facts. First time Todd stuck up the stage there was a guard riding gun, and Todd just naturally

beat the stuffings out of him! Second time, Todd made the guard walk the whole way back to Virgil. The last time the guard was shot. Todd was getting mean. Since then there ain't enough money in Virgil to buy a guard for Flying S money. Anyway, nobody was supposed to know what trip Ben Davis was bringing the hard money. Seems like Todd managed to find out just the same."

THE jolting of the stage sent lancing pains through Adam's head, and even more sharp were his growing suspicions. The way the bandit leader had sheered off when the other outlaw had named Marjorie Morgan, and more than that the implication behind Doc Remus' words. Joseph Candley Morgan, late of Virginia City, builder of wilderness empires. Adam shook his head. The idea didn't make good sense yet.

The little doctor grunted. "This last haul of Todd's is going to raise billy ned with your young man's plans, Miss Drake. I'm not talking out of turn when I say young Tom Selman's bucking some pretty tough going."

Madelon Drake's red hair glistened in the waning light of the sun. Her face was determined. "Tommy's no quitter."

White thought Remus' expression shifted too quickly. "That's the gospel truth," he agreed, but the emphasis of his words was strange.

With the suddenness typical of the mountains, darkness closed in, but it did not slow Ben Davis' headlong pace. The lurching and jolting of the rough road did not help Adam's aching head, and he closed his eyes.

Hours later, the flicker of lights brought Adam's eyes open again. They were passing a farmhouse set near the road. Voices yelled halloos. Then more houses closer together. Through the coach window White watched the gathering lights. They stretched across what seemed to be a wide valley; other lights in the flat blackness of night were higher, presaging the mountains that hemmed Medicine Bend in.

"Nearly there!" Ben Davis sang out. "But later'n hell!"

Abruptly the scattered dwellings closed in, and the horses clip-clopped down a wide street. Yellow lights shot oblong patches across the road. A flaming tar barrel sent staggering shadows up the face of a false-fronted saloon. Then brakes squealed, and the stage jounced to a stop. "Medicine Bend!" Ben Davis yelled.

A veranda-faced brick building loomed close, lights flowing from windows. Men gathered on the boardwalk. Voices hummed. White climbed down, reached up to help Marjorie Morgan, then Madelon Drake. Madelon's face was peaked but she was smiling.

"I'm frightened, Adam!" she whispered.

"Never get scared until you're licked," Adam whispered back. "And you're a long way from being licked!"

Then men closed about them. A big, burly man grasped Marjorie Morgan, swung her up into hungry arms. "Dad! Oh, Dad!" she cried out happily.

"Marjorie!" The man's deep voice boomed out. "Ben Davis, I ought to skin you alive. What a scare you gave me!"

"Skin Todd Krale, Joe," Davis answered sharply. "He's the ranny that held us up—an' I mean that both ways."

"What's this?" Morgan thundered. "By heck, it's time an end was made to—"

Unobtrusively, White moved away. The luggage case was open. He found his suitcase, lifted it down, then paused as he caught sight of Madelon Drake. A tall, well-built handsome man came up to her. Dark lines grooved his face but he was smiling.

"That you, Madelon?"

"Oh, Tommy!" the girl cried out, then Tom Selman had Madelon in his arms. White moved off. He was stopped by Doc Remus at the boardwalk. The little man was grinning.

"Buy you a drink, White?"

"Thanks but not tonight. I'm beat." Adam took the smaller man's proffered hand. "But you can direct me to a good hotel."

"Sure, son," Abel Remus replied. His sharp-nosed face was quizzical. "There'll be time tomorrow for that drink. Try the Taylor House across the street. Tell Dora Taylor I sent you. Tell her to give you room 26. That's in the back where it'll be quiet. Medicine Bend gets noisy along about midnight." He hesitated. "White, I don't know for sure what you're bucking here. It ain't none of my business. But I like the way

you look. If you need a friend—well, I'm always a sucker for a Texan." He chuckled. "Reckon that's 'cause I was born in Midlands."

White thanked him. The group around the stage was still there. He moved away. He heard his name called but he did not stop. He wanted no thank-yous tonight.

ADAM found the hotel room clean and comfortable. His head still ached, and he lost no time washing up and turning in. He fell into a troubled sleep, only to awaken suddenly. The town of Medicine Bend had come to life. He heard the jangling bang of a piano, discordant voices muted by distance. It had not been the night noise that had awakened him, for the sudden start still rang along his nerves. Then he tensed, completely awake. In the darkness of the room, a cigarette glowed, not far from his bed. He saw the murky red glow outline the dark, ugly features of a man's face.

"You awake, White?" The words were soft. "Shore, yore eyes are open. I'll make this short. Get out of town! Tomorrow! Climb back on that stage, and get out!"

"What is this?" White demanded, sitting up. Alarm rang in his head. His guns were in his suitcase.

"I'm not going to argue, mister," the cold, whispering voice intoned. "I'm tellin' you. Get out! There's been three owners of the Pine Tree in two years. The first feller was lucky. He got out. The second was stubborn—and not so lucky. He ain't never been found. The last feller—he had the worst luck of all. His horse dragged him to death. See what I mean? You ain't no Eastern dude; you got savvy. You can see which way the wind's blowin'. If you think Todd Krale laid one on you, just try stayin' around. If we got to come out to the Pine Tree after you it's goin' to be just too damned bad! Understand?"

White came off the bed. The half-seen body of the man standing in the room was burly, muscular. The wind went out of his lungs in a tortured gasp as White's fist struck his bulging middle. White saw him reel back, bring up his arm in a vicious chopping stroke; light glinted along a gun barrel. It struck alongside White's head, smashed him to the floor. Pinwheeling lights spun crazily. Then the intruder struck again and the floor smashed into White's face.

"You loco fool!" the man hissed. "We don't want to kill you but if you want it that way, we'll shore oblige."

IV

TODD KRALE urged the tall bay he rode up the shale ridge, twisting in the saddle to stare back down the trail. He knew well enough there would be no pursuit, and yet he paused at the ridge top to listen. The night was still save for the hoofbeats of his two companions. He grunted with satisfaction and urged the bay on. Something over three hours after the stage holdup, they rode down a twisting canyon and came in sight of a lighted cabin. Wood smoke drifted through the tangle of pines as the three outlaws rode in. At the porch Krale dismounted.

"Joe, take the horses around back. Stay there until I call you." Todd waited until the other two were gone, then stepped upon the porch. He opened the door. A man sitting beside the open hearth glanced up. He was nearing middle age, but the hardness of youth yet clung to him. His face was hard, flat-planed; his eyes were dull agate.

"Get it, Todd?"

"Did you ever see the day I didn't?" Krale slammed the door. He flung his hat to a point of a set of antlers that served the purpose. He moved toward the fire, holding out his hands.

The other man smiled. "That's right. We've been working together a long time, the three of us, and always bringing home the bacon."

Todd nodded sulkily. "Shore, but this time the setup's wrong. I can feel it."

"How fat do you want your meat, Todd?" the other demanded. "You're doing okay."

"Yo're damn' right I am!" Krale snapped back. "But so are you an'—"

"Stop it, Krale!" The man before the fire made a quick gesture. "We agreed there'd be no names mentioned when I came up here."

"Aw, hell, Drag!" Ted growled. "The others know who you are. They ain't dumb. It just makes for trouble keeping it from them."

Drag Hanson grinned, and his face,

smiling, seemed harder than before. "I'm not going to argue about this, Todd. The boss—"

"Okay, okay, so you've put me in my place," Krale rumbled. "I'm still gettin' saddle-sore thinkin' about all the things that can go wrong."

Hanson turned back to the fire. "It's working out. Give it time. We're not playing for table-stakes. This is big."

Krale grunted. "Shore. It's always big. It's always a shore thing until yo're wearin' a hemp necktie. I don't mind stickin' up the stage now an' then; I don't mind doin' a little rustlin' to keep things boilin'; an' I ain't bashful about flingin' my name around for people to tie things to. But there's a limit, an I've just about reached it."

Hanson rolled a cigarette, lighted it. "You're just talking to hear the noise, Todd. We've been sitting in on this game for three years; it's going to pay off before another year's gone. Think about it: Morgan's Empire—there's a stake for you!"

"But am I going to be around to enjoy it?" Krale protested. "Am I goin' to sit on my fat backside an' spoon up the gravy? Hell, no! I'm goin' to be draggin' my tail out of here."

"And get more money for it than you ever saw before. Todd Krale's just a name. There're a lot of names. Take your pick. Nobody's ever seen yore face on a job. Yo're safe."

Todd grunted again. "That's easy for you to say! Sittin' tight up at the Pine Tree ain't nobody shootin' at you. You ain't gettin' slugged." He rubbed a finger over a visible swelling on his chin.

Drag Hanson grinned. "So you got one hung on you!"

For a moment Krale's frown darkened his face, then he laughed. "Shore I did! But that ain't the half of it! It's your turn next, Drag. The feller that hung this on my jaw, let me tell you about him. He's big. That's first. He's hard, and that's more important. He's soft from easy livin' but he hasn't had it soft for long. He ain't the kind we've run into before. His name's White, an' I'll bet it was something else not long ago. He walks soft an' he hits hard. He wasn't packin' a gun, for he was ridin' into somethin' he counted a soft touch. Now he knows better. When you see him he'll be packin' a gun, and five'll get you twenty he knows the handle from the barrel of a Colt."

Hanson's mouth tightened into a snarl. "The hell you say!"

"The hell I say!" Todd fired back. "This one ain't goin' to scare no better'n Veerman did. If you want to keep up that fancy little game yo're playin' at the Pine Tree, yo're goin' to have to drop him. An' me, I don't want no part of the job."

Hanson shrugged. "What difference does it make? Who's to say he's going to get to the Pine Tree? A .30-.30 slug doesn't care how tough your hide is, it goes through just the same."

"That's what I mean!" Krale yelled. "That's what I mean about this setup. Shore, you got a sweet thing out to the Pine Tree but we know it ain't goin' to last forever. What's the sense o' killin' a man we don't even know? First there was Bennett. You scared hell out of him an' he got out after squealin' to Morgan. Then Veerman. You didn't have much luck scarin' him! An' Franklin—"

"Shut up!" The foreman of the Pine Tree stood up. "You're not good at thinking, Krale. Leave that to me and the boss. You don't savvy the deal, even bein' in on it for three years. Do you think it matters about the stinking little dab we take out of the Pine Tree? It's bigger than that I tell you! As for White, it won't take long to figure him out. If he gets to the Pine Tree—well let him come! Let him snoop. Maybe he'll find something. That's just what we want!"

Krale shook his head. "Damned if'n I don't think yo're plumb loco, sometimes."

"Then stop thinking." Hanson crossed to the door. "My horse is outside. The boss said for you to bring the dough tomorrow. Ride out yourself. He wants to talk to you. Maybe you'll get something straightened out in that hard head of yours. But pick your time because the boss's got other things on his mind."

The outlaw leader said nothing as Hanson left him there before the fire, a puzzled frown between his eyes. Drag closed the door behind him. He got his horse, swung up, and rode into the darkness. His thoughts were quick, angry. Damn the dullness that kept Todd Krale from understanding what they were doing. Still, what did it matter as long as Krale carried out his part? In a

better mood, then, he rode carefully, and once out of the hills, put his mount to a gallop. The lights of Medicine Bend were glimmering to the West when he pulled up. He didn't have long to wait. A lone rider came from the direction of the town.

"That you, Blaine?" Drag called out cautiously.

"Me, boss!" Blaine's gruff voice answered. He was a big, solid man. He reined in.

"You see White?"

"See him?" Blaine groaned. "Man alive, I'll tell you I seen him!"

"What happened?"

"Plenty," Blaine growled. "My gut's goin' to ache for a week. I took the key you give me an' I got into the room without any noise. Boss I didn't make no more sound than a yawnin' cat but when that hall door closed his eyes popped open. For a second I expected a slug in my belly, but he didn't move, an' I got the hunch he didn't have a gun in reach. I kept my own on him every second while I gave him the spiel. I made it tough. You know what that ranny did? Boss, he come off that bunk like a cat off a hot stove. I didn't even see him comin'. He landed one in my belly an' I thought the lights was goin' out. Then I caught him alongside the head with the barrel of my gun. He went down, an' I hit him again to keep him there. But I think he got the hunch. An' I don't think he liked it!"

"Stop thinking and get going!" Hanson ordered.

"Shore, boss. You comin' back to the Pine Tree?"

"No."

"You goin' to bring White out tomorrow?"

"You ask too damned many questions, Blaine! If I wanted you to know I'd tell you. I'm not going to bring White out. Let him find his own way. I'm going to see the boss."

"You mean Morgan?"

Hanson hesitated a moment. The darkness hid the sudden grin on his face. "Yeah," he said. "I mean Morgan." He waited until Blaine rode on toward the distant Pine Tree, then he moved out to the road. Morgan's Castle was in Medicine Bend. Medicine Bend was to the west. Drag spurred his horse, riding north.

THE Taylor House dining room was empty when Adam White came in. The morning sun was bright on the checkered tablecloth. Dora Taylor watched him as he crossed the room, picked a chair that faced the window, and sat down. She came up, smiling.

"Good morning young man," she said. White managed a smile, but his eyes were sharp. The distrust created by the events of the past two days was without a center to focus upon, and it covered everyone with whom he came in contact.

"Just coffee this morning."

She nodded. "I heard what you did during the holdup. There aren't many men in this town who would have taken a swing at Todd Krale."

"Maybe I didn't know any better."

"Maybe. But I don't believe it." She looked closely at him. "You're pale, and there's a cut on your forehead. Did you let Doc Remus look at you."

He shook his head. "Thought I might this morning. It wasn't so bad last night. Where's his office?"

"It's over the bank but he won't be there. He never shows up until after noon." She frowned. "He has a place north of town. I think he likes to be alone. You drink your coffee then come out to the kitchen. I'll fix that head of yours."

White thanked her. He felt vaguely disturbed, as he had intended putting some blunt questions to Doctor Abel Remus. Somehow, he felt that wily individual could supply some of the answers.

A half hour later White was on the street, his scalp still tingling to the bite of liniment. Mrs. Taylor's motherly instincts had come to the fore, and she had fussed over him busily. It gave him an unaccustomed warmth inside, and he was grateful to her. He lighted a cigarette as he left the hotel, and paused on the boardwalk to take in the town.

Medicine Bend was a smaller, older version of Virgil. The railroad would never conquer the mountains, but the town would grow in spite of that. Aside from Virgil, forty miles away, there was no other town inside a radius of two hundred miles. Thousands of square miles of mountains and wilderness, not more than a tenth of the total area owned by individuals. To the

north were scattered stands of forest, deep, impenetrable. But there was open range, too, and highlands where sheep spent the summer months. A vast, sprawling territory, greater in size than many independent nations. Morgan's Empire—one man's domain. Lumber and cattle and sheep, a land rich in minerals and water. And one small chunk out of that vastness was White's. He belonged here. That was the thing that made him grin as he strode along the boardwalk.

The morning was a bright one. Where the town ended, the green of forest began, running from the timberline high into the mountains. To the north a range like the arched back of a cat thrust up, topped with a streak of white. Snow. Despite the warmth of the sun, the wind, coming from the north, was cold, and White did not regret digging his heavy flannel shirt from his suitcase. He wore no coat, his slim figure bulged at the hips by the two Colt revolvers he reluctantly decided to wear.

At the end of the street, on the far side, was a squat red brick building. A black signboard proclaimed in block gold letters: MEDICINE BEND NATIONAL BANK. Centered below the name was another: *Joseph Candley Morgan.* White crossed the street, entered the bank. A clerk pointed out a glass-panelled door to the rear in answer to his query.

The door opened before White came up to it. The man who came out was big; that was the first impression. His shoulders were square and heavy, his face carved from a single block of granite. He was clean shaven in contrast to most of the older men of the day, and his hair was tar-black, without a touch of gray. His eyes were blue, sharp and keen of expression. His age might be anything between forty and sixty.

For one long minute the blue eyes returned his scrutiny, then Joseph Candley Morgan's lion head bounced in a nod. His grip was as hard as a pine plank, and the strength behind it knew few limits.

"Adam White," Morgain said. "I caught just a glimpse of you last night. Must say you're not quite what I expected." His eyes went to the guns at White's waist.

"What did you expect?" Adam countered.

Morgan laughed. "I don't really know. But come in."

Morgan's office was big, pine-paneled. A square desk sat before a broad window that opened onto the street. Morgan motioned toward a heavy leather chair, and White sat down. For a moment Morgan considered him quizzically, then he nodded abruptly, strode to the desk. He sat down lightly for all his bulk, and his long-fingered hands built a pyramid on the desk top.

"First, Mr. White, I'm not going to waste words thanking you for what you did for my daughter yesterday. It was a man's obligation and I'm pleased you saw fit to fulfill it. Words are just so much wind through a man's mouth. I'll try to thank you in another way sometime. Frankly, there aren't many men to whom I owe a debt, Mr. White."

Adam could believe it. The towering strength of the man was evident.

"I haven't the least doubt," Morgan went on, "but what you've been told things, have heard others, that aren't to my credit. I'm being frank when I tell you I don't give a damn about what's said concerning me."

White's smile was cold. "I was told in Virgil that Morgan had snared another sucker for the Pine Tree. I heard here in Medicine Bend that three other men have tried to buy the Pine Tree from you. One ran away; one is missing; and one is dead."

"For that reason you are wearing your guns, eh?" The granite face cracked in a wide smile. "Can you use them? Never mind answering. Let me see your hands."

It was an old Ranger trick, Adam knew. He held his hands out, palms up. They were soft, but with thin lines of callus at the base of the thumbs. The brand of the gunman.

"Ahuh!" Morgan let his breath out slowly. His eyes went to White's face, and he frowned. He leaned back in his chair, pulled out a box of cigars, took one, pushed the box toward White. Adam took one, bit off the end, accepted a light from Morgan. For a moment they smoked in silence.

"In a way," Morgan said, slowly, "I'm not surprised. You pick out any four men, and it's almost certain that one of them will be dangerous. You're the fourth man. I can say this, White, it doesn't matter one damned bit to me! My position is exactly what it seems: I'm selling the Pine Tree.

You're buying it. That's all."

MORGAN placed his hands together in the pyramid again, stared down at them at length before he went on. "I don't know what you had in mind when you answered my ad in the New York paper. But I'm willing to wager this isn't what you expected. I don't usually explain anything. I don't have to. I wouldn't now except that you've placed me in your debt. For that reason only I'm going to tell you a few things." Morgan pulled his hands apart, drew a cigar from between his lips, studied the building length of ash on it. "I've been here in Montana for thirty years; I struck it rich in Virginia City. I wasn't with Plummer, in fact I gave the order that resulted in the Vigilante meetings. You can verify that by Doc Remus. He was there, too. I've fought hard to gain what I own and I'm not too old to fight to keep it.

"The Pine Tree Ranch was owned by the Selman family when I first came here to Medicine Bend.. Tom Selman's father, Cyrus Selman, was the owner. We never hit it off, trouble grew between us. I fought Selman with every power I had. Eventually I won. I took everything he had, including the Pine Tree. The Flying S that young Tom now holds is all that's left of his father's holdings. Cyrus Selman knew he was beaten; he shot himself. People blamed me then, still do. Young Tom has never ceased to fight, the hot-headed young fool. But I've tried to leave him alone. I'm not asking you to understand my reasons. Cyrus Selman was a hard, fair man. He fought me with everything he had, and I respected him for it. In a way, I've felt deep regret for the manner in which our fight ended. For that reason I never took over the Pine Tree personally. I preferred to let an outsider take it." The granite face was set; only the blue eyes were alive, and White felt deep emotion stirring there.

"I first sold the Pine Tree to a man named Bennett," Morgan went on. "He had a dust-up with Drag Hanson, Selman's old foreman of the Pine Tree, and backed out of the deal. Then came Veerman, a Dutchman. After a month he came to me. He swore his life was in danger, that he had uncovered something that concerned me vitally. He left Medicine Bend to return to the Pine Tree. He's never been seen since. I don't know what happened to him. Maybe he was more frightened than I thought. Maybe he left the country. But I do know what happened to Paul Franklin. He was the third buyer of the Pine Tree, and a tough, seasoned man. He was dragged to death by his horse. In each case, whether you choose to believe it or not, I refunded the money paid down, and took the Pine Tree back.

Morgan's rocky smile cleft his chin once more, fleetingly. His eyes were coldly intent. "You have a choice of two things to believe, Mr. White: That Tom Selman is using this means of striking back at me, and of regaining the Pine Tree, or that I'm as black as I'm usually painted and am behind it all for reasons of my own. And to be honest with you, I don't give a damn which you believe."

White sat very still.

"There's only one question to be answered, Mr. White," Morgan finished. "I have the check you mailed as a deposit on the Pine Tree. The deal is not yet final."

Slowly, White shook his head.

"Keep the check," he said. "I'm sticking by our deal for the Pine Tree—thirty-thousand down payment, ten years on the balance. I intend to make the Pine Tree a paying proposition." Adam smiled coldly. "You said I had a choice of two things to believe. It doesn't strike me that way. I don't know Tom Selman. I don't know anybody here. But there is another answer, it strikes me. Somebody's using Tom Selman to get at you. Someone not able or willing to strike at you directly."

Morgan's face remained expressionless. "I've thought of that, too, Mr. White," he said. He stood up. "The Pine Tree is now your business. Drag Hanson was Cyrus Selman's foreman at the time of his death.. I've left the Pine Tree entirely up to him until it's sold. You'll have to make your own arrangements with him if you want him to stay on."

"Thank you." Adam took the proffered hand. Again he was aware of the latent strength in the man's hands and arms.

Morgan hesitated. "One more thing, Mr. White. My daughter's homecoming is an event in Medicine Bend. It will be at my

home tonight. All Medicine Bend will be there. I promised my daughter I would ask you to come."

"Thank you again." White felt the antagonism was stronger. "But I'd planned on riding out to the Pine Tree today."

"I sent word to Hanson," Morgan said. "I told him to ride in for you. But Hanson doesn't always take orders. He hasn't come. I don't think he will."

White felt that Morgan enjoyed an odd satisfaction at his predicament. "It doesn't matter," he answered. "I can find my way out there. But tomorrow will do. I'll see you tonight, then, sir."

At the door Morgan hesitated again. "Mr. White, there is another matter. My daughter. She's very young and impressionable. You saved her embarrassment if not actual harm. It is quite possible she will enlarge upon your service to her in her own mind. You will please remember that. It may save trouble later."

For a moment the affront of the man made anger ring in Adam's head. He felt his face burning. But he held steady. His voice went cold. "Trouble for you or for me?"

Morgan's manner changed. His face remained stone, but the antagonism was openly evident. "Someday my daughter will fall in love and marry. It won't be here in Medicine Bend. It won't be a man like you. That's plain talk, Mr. White. Don't make it necessary for me to give you a stronger warning."

His voice had deepened into a rumble. He opened the door and White stepped out. Angry words fought for expression but he held his teeth tightly closed. The domineering strength of Morgan had come suddenly, thrusting at him, trying to break him. To argue with him would be to play his own game.

White started back down the boardwalk toward the Taylor House, only to come up short as he saw Madelon Drake. The girl was sitting in a chair on the broad veranda of the hotel. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying. She saw him, came to her feet, rushed to meet him.

"Oh, Adam, Adam!" she whispered. Her hand found his. He managed a reassuring squeeze.

"Easy, youngster," White said. He led the way to the veranda, got her settled in a chair. "Easy does it! Tell me what's wrong?"

"It's Tom," she cried out. The sadness of her eyes and mouth was enhanced. "He's changed. Something has happened, I don't know what! I think he knows about me!" Her voice was tragic. "The way he looked at me this morning, as if he hated me, wanted to kill me! It was terrible! He had been drinking. He said—he said—he was going to send me back to Chicago, that he was through with me."

"Ahuh!" White was shocked. On top of his own problems, this!

"Adam, oh, Adam! I can't go back." Her face was appealing, frightened. "I don't know what to do, which way to turn. I love him, Adam!"

White took her hand and squeezed it tightly. "Going to quit the first time you get hit?" he demanded. "I don't know what's eating Selman, but believe me, there is a fellow with things on his mind. You're going to stick it out. It will work out, believe me!"

"Adam, I don't know—"

"I do!" he insisted. "There isn't a prettier girl than you in all Montana, and there are ten thousand galoots just busting to kiss your boots. To hell with Tom Selman—and make him know you feel that way! You're thinking he's the top dog in your life, but twist it the other way around. There are men who'd walk through the hot place barefoot just to pay their respects to you."

Her eyes widened and her crying stopped. "I'd like to believe that, Adam."

He grinned at her. "You're looking at one, Molly!" he said. "I'm going to be around, you know."

Suddenly she laughed. "Now I know you're lying! I've seen the way you've looked at Marjorie Morgan and I don't blame you. But I get your hunch as you'd say. That's twice you've given me a boost when I've needed it most."

"There's going to be a shindig at Morgan's tonight," Adam said. "I'll be there. And I'm expecting a dance. We'll give these backwoods Montanans something to talk about. And maybe put a bug in Mister Tom Selman's ear at the same time!"

She nodded, smiling up at him. "Thank

you, Adam."

He said goodbye and moved back to the boardwalk. He was frowning. "All I need now," he thought, savagely, "is for some short-horn sheriff to show up with a warrant for El Blanco!"

And almost as the echo of his thought, he heard a step behind him. A heavy hand fell on his arm. He stopped and turned. A tall, thin individual stood there. His long face was solemn. On his checkered shirt a silver star gleamed and glistened.

"Adam White?" he demanded. "Just a minute, feller, I want to talk to you!"

V

TENSION tightened the muscles along White's shoulders; then, as suddenly, it vanished. He smiled. "I'm willing to listen," he replied.

"My name's Loper. Dan Loper, Marshal of Medicine Bend. I wanted to see you last night when the stage pulled in but you got away too fast. Don't reckon you can add anything to what I know but I got to ask questions."

"Sure, Marshal," White answered. "Is it too early in the morning, or can I buy you a drink while you're asking those questions?"

Loper's grin was crooked, his eyes shifty. "Ain't never too early for good likker."

The saloon was nearly empty as they came up to the bar. Loper downed a shot glass of whiskey. He refilled the glass hastily. "It's like this, White, I know who robbed the stage. Hell, it was Todd Krale. But there's got to be some evidence to prove it. While it ain't town business, I'm actin' deputy sheriff coverin' this area. Any chance for you to recognize them fellers if you seen them again?"

White shook his head. "Sorry, but they were all masked."

"Ahuh. Guess that makes the rest of my questions unnecessary." Loper glanced regretfully at his empty glass.

White pegged the man at a glance. Too long had he lived among Loper's kind not to recognize the crooked breed. His eyes narrowed. "I don't like drinking alone," he said.

Loper nodded eagerly. "Well, now, that's right nice of you, young feller."

White watched him raise the glass to his lips. "I'm buying the Pine Tree as I guess you've heard?" The marshal gulped the drink, set the glass on the bar. His watery eyes blinked rapidly. White waited a moment, and the tall, thin marshal moved nervously, shifting his feet. "So far I've heard a lot of strange things about the setup here but none of them has made any sense."

Loper fidgeted. "I reckon I'd better be goin'."

White opened his wallet. The five hundred dollars he had picked up at the bank made a thick wad. He made a show of searching through it, came up with a ten dollar bill which he laid on the bar. To the bartender he said: "Bring another bottle to that table by the wall." Only then did he look at Loper. "I'm going to lay one hundred dollars on that table. The man who can give me some straight information can pick them up."

Loper watched him as he walked over to the table and kicked out a chair. White paid him no attention, but sat down. The bartender brought the bottle. When he moved away White opened his wallet. He took out five twenty-dollar bills, made a fan of them, laid them on the table.

The marshal moved uneasily. He looked around the room. It was empty except for the bartender washing glasses at the far end of the bar. He looked out through the swinging doors. His watery blue eyes blinked. He didn't look at White. Then, like a man walking through water, Loper came across the room. His legs jackknifed him into a chair. The money vanished. A thin line of sweat beaded his pallid brow. He poured a drink from the bottle, downed it.

In a low voice, he said: "There's a lot of ways to figger a play like this. One thing is sure, it ain't nobody playin' a lone hand. Joe Morgan's a big man, a mighty big man, and some folks just natcherly hate his guts. Supposin' there was one—an' I don't know but what he might be anybody—that hated him just a little more than a man should hate. It keeps boilin' out of him, an' he strikes at Morgan any way he can." White thought of Tom Selman. "Then supposin' this somebody is workin' in cahoots with Todd Krale an' Drag Hanson. See how it fits? Bennett was scared off the Pine Tree

by Hanson. Veerman, you can bet he's dead, layin' in the hills somewheres. Franklin, well there's a queer deal. Finest horseman I ever seen. Sat his saddle like he was growed to it. Can't figger out how a feller like that'd get his foot hung up in a stirrup unless somebody planned it that way.

"The Pine Tree is a nice hunk of change. An' Hanson's spendin' it free. He don't want nobody buyin' it an' ruinin' his little game. Then, too, Selman hates the guts of anybody who tries to take it. An' with Krale throwed in for good measure—well, all hell's gonna bust loose in these mountains soon. Twenty years ago the Lincoln County War started down in New Mexico over the same damn' situation. It can happen again. An' that's what somebody wants just awful damn' bad!"

The Marshal of Medicine Bend got up then. White let him go. Loper didn't look back. The swinging doors closed behind him. For a long minute White sat still. Todd Krale, Drag Hanson, Tom Selman; was that the answer? The picture wasn't clear. Too many missing parts.

ON THE street again, White stood still. Across the street was the general store. White went over, entered the store. To the left was the grocery, with barrels of crackers and flour and stacks of canned goods. To his right was the hardware. A heavy calibre rifle hung on wires suspended directly over the battered counter. White looked at the rifle.

"Interested in a good gun, stranger?" The storekeeper asked.

"My name's White," Adam said. "I own the Pine Tree. I'll be wanting a lot of things. This the only general store in town?"

The storekeeper nodded. He was small. His hooked nose thrust out from a narrow face. His smile was friendly. "Yep. I'm Amos Single. Mrs. Miller has drygoods down the street, otherwise I got it all. Pack it in from Virgil. Anything you want."

White moved his hands; the movement was without warning. He saw the storekeeper pale. His ivory handled Colt revolvers were levelled. He laid them on the counter. He kept his eyes on the grocer. The man swallowed, slowly, with effort.

"Man alive!" he whispered. "I ain't seen that trick done since I left Santone. I seen fellers throwin' guns here, an' I've laughed at 'em. I ain't laughin' now!"

"Thanks," White replied. "I need shells. These have been in the belt a year. I want a box of fifty. And a rifle. A Winchester .30-.30 and shells for it, too."

Amos Single nodded. He reached behind him, brought out a box of shells. He went to the rear of the store, returned with a Winchester and four boxes of shells for it. White picked up the rifle, worked the lever, sighted it. He nodded, laid it back on the counter. He opened the box of shells, dumped them on the counter, emptied his two guns, removed his gunbelt. He loaded the guns first, then the belt. He didn't load the rifle. Putting money on the counter, he asked: "Where can I get a good horse an' saddle?"

"Livery stable's at the end of the street," Single answered. He watched as White strapped the gunbelt back on.

Adam settled the guns, eased them, then nodded. "I'm going to be hiring a crew for the Pine tree. I'll pay top-hand money for riders, and more for top-hands. How about putting out the word?"

"Shore." Single nodded, then frowned. "Mister White, it ain't none of my business but I reckon I ought to tell you that you won't get no riders for the Pine Tree here in Medicine Bend. Your ranch has a bad reputation and riders is a funny lot. Superstitious as hell. You might have luck in Virgil."

White studied the man, then smiled, and put out his hand. "Thanks. That's about the first friendly thing that's happened to me here. I won't forget it."

At the livery stable he rented a tall chestnut with a good saddle. He left the horse there with instructions to have it ready for him in the morning. Returning to the Taylor House, he felt tired, mixed up. But two things stood clear in his mind. For one, he would have words to say to Drag Hanson. For another, he would see Marjorie Morgan again. The thought brought a smile to his lips.

He left his room twice that day; once to have lunch, and again later in the afternoon when he walked the length of the single street before returning. It was nearly five then, and the blue sky had darkened,

low dark clouds piling atop the snowy peaks to the west. It remained warm, although wind scurries sent spirals of dust dancing down the street. At seven he washed, shaved, and dressed in his dark suit. He considered the gunbelt, then frowned. He shrugged finally, placed it in the suitcase against his return, locked the bag. He went back down to the lobby.

Sudden mountain night had fallen. The lobby was lighted by lamps. Across the street a flaming tar barrel staggered shadows across the garish face of a saloon. Wagons, buckboards, buggies, moved along the street, intermingled with single riders. It was shaping up to be a gala night in Medicine Bend. White went out.

MORGAN'S CASTLE stood above the town where a shelving bench shot back along the valley rim. The high mountains stood behind it in a sentinel row. The eye-windows stared down over Medicine Bend, toward the Medicine River where it came down from the mountains to drop into the deep gorges to the southeast. Twin rows of laurels lined the lane that angled off sharply from the town road. As he passed the entrance, the house itself stood in outline. A hulking bulk of red brick and rococo design; cupolas reared upward, and long thin windows reached like gaunt yellow fingers across the face of the house. The lawns around the house were bright with lights; lanterns swung from trees, in gay festoons. The house itself was outlined with them. As he came along the tree-edged road, White caught the muted strains of violins, then the deeper tones of a piano. A dancing pavilion had been set up, and to either side stood refreshment tables. White paused a moment in appreciation of the scene spread before him.

Off to one side the carriages and wagons were being parked. As he neared, White caught the muffled murmer of many voices, then the music began once more, a lively quadrille. He found himself humming the gay tune, and grinned. The wind was dying away, and there was a warmth to the still air, although tinged with a chill from the mountain snow. The storm seemed to be held in abeyance.

At the steps of the broad-fronted house, a group was gathered beneath a cluster of lanterns and lamps. White recognized Morgan's broad figure, and the smaller build of Doctor Abel Remus, sidewhiskers shining in the light. Then another form took his eyes. She was in white, a fluffy gown that rustled as she moved. Her hair was bronze in the light of the lamps. A laughing group came before him, and he walked behind them. He heard greetings, a hearty laugh. Then she saw him and her eyes widened. In an instant she was sweeping down the stairs, her hands outstretched, and she was smiling.

"Adam White!" she whispered. "I hoped you'd come. Father said you were riding to the Pine Tree today and couldn't make it. I'm glad you changed your mind."

Her eyes shone, and White felt awkwardly stiff, uneasy. "I'm not much of a hand at parties."

"If you hadn't come I'd never have forgiven you!" she flashed. "You know Dad? And Doc Remus?"

White nodded. He felt Morgan's cold gaze on his face, met his eyes unflinching. "I know your father, Miss Morgan."

"My name is Marjorie to my friends and you're one of them!" she returned. "Father, aren't you going to speak to Adam?"

Joseph Candley Morgan nodded his head, slowly. His granite face remained expressionless but his eyes were angry. "You're welcome here, Mr. White."

The girl caught something of the challenge in his manner. She looked from one to the other. Then suddenly she laughed. "Adam, I never noticed until this moment how much alike you and father are! The same set to your faces. It's uncanny."

Abel Remus took White's hand. "Glad to see you, White," he said. "Marjorie, men who think alike often wear similar expressions. I think this young man and your father are both thinking of you."

"How nice!" She laughed. "Doc, introduce Adam to the others, will you, please? Adam, I've saved a dance for you. The first waltz. Don't forget."

White murmured his thanks as Remus pulled him away. He felt Morgan's gaze still on him as they walked toward the refreshment table.

"For a man who's been in Medicine Bend less than a day, you've certainly managed to get yourself talked about," Remus said.

"Amos Single is here an' he's doin' some talkin'. Amos was raised in the southwest. He bought John Wesley Hardin his last drink in El Paso. He says you've got Hardin's trick with a gun. And Single doesn't talk to make noise. The word is out."

"Is that bad?" White asked.

Remus shrugged. "Not generally speaking," he answered. "Some fellers will walk soft around you, and some fellers will talk loud to your face. I don't think there's much to worry about with either of those. But something about you rubbed Joe Morgan the wrong way. Marjorie hasn't caught on yet. But I know Joe. He's going to step on you, young feller."

The orchestra struck up a tune and a caller started intoning square-dance calls. It saved White from answering. Doc Remus made room at the broad table, got two cups of punch, held one out to White. He grinned. "Here's luck, White!"

"Good or bad, Doc?" White asked. Remus' face kept smiling. "You'll need any kind you can get," he answered.

Doc Remus seemed to know everyone, and was known in return. White was presented to ranchers, farmers, to business men from Medicine Bend, and even some from Virgil. Twice he saw men he thought looked familiar, but neither spoke. There were Texans in Montana by the thousand, men who had followed the northern trail in the years since the war with Spain; for that reason alone there was a good chance of recognition, and White expected it. Legally, he was not wanted in Texas or any other state, and certainly he had no reputation to ruin here! He grinned.

The music was loud and dancers filled the floor. Carriage lights and lanterns streamed down the long tree-lined lane from town. The hubub grew in volume. White sensed Doc Remus watching him, and surprised an oddly intent expression on the other's whiskered face. "Medicine Bend on a spree," Remus chortled. "You'll see them all here. Except for a few diehards who hate Morgan too much to come."

Mrs. Taylor came up flustered. "Abel, this is my dance, I think!"

Doc Remus winked at White. "You're on your own, Adam," he said.

White watched the doctor gallantly lead the towering Mrs. Taylor to the floor. The spryness of Remus was matched by the exuberance of Mrs. Taylor. Other couples filled the floor. Off to one side a group of men clustered about a barrel hoisted onto a saw-tree. A tin cup was thrust into White's hand. The cider was good and it was hard. He felt the burn of it inside him. An uproar sounded and men scudded away in the direction of the parking area. White followed. A man grinned at him.

"These damn' younkers got no sense a-tall," he yelled. "Fightin' already!"

VI

INSIDE a ring of men a pair of youths were stripped to the waist, faces flushed, arms extended in crude imitation of boxing poses, danced about like gamecocks. One went down from a hard right hand, and Dan Loper's lean frame heaved into view. "Break it up, damn it!" he bellowed. He pushed his way into the group. The two contestants were hustled away. Loper was sweating. He saw White, his watery eyes blinked, and he promptly lost himself in the crowd.

White didn't return to the dance pavilion. He walked around the house. Morgan's Castle; red brick, solid. He felt a twinge of envy. He found a quiet place on the rear porch, sat on the railing, the lantern-lighted scene spread below him. A girl in a white dress paused, peered through the dusk toward him. It was Marjorie.

"Here you are!" she exclaimed.

"Trespassing," he answered.

"No." She was wearing a perfume that went to his head. "I was looking for you."

"You found me. Like I said, I don't mix too well."

"You're not really trying," she returned. Her smile was strange. "Father told me that he'd warned you not to see me again."

He laughed, shortly. "I've been told to do a lot of things and told not to do a lot of others."

"Do you always do what you're told?"

"No."

She waited a moment. "I heard Amos Single talking to father. He said he knew you. He said you were a Texas gunslinger and that there were dead men behind you. Father laughed."

"Did he?"

"Yes, but not like he usually laughs. It was a strange sound, like what Amos had said meant something special to him. Who are you, Adam White?"

"Just that. Adam White, a man buying a Montana ranch. A man who doesn't know a friend from an enemy here, and there seems to be a lot of one or the other."

"You mean enemies, don't you? There's a hard core inside you when you speak like that. It's something you've tried very hard to lose. You're running away from something, leaving something behind you. I've felt that."

White flipped his cigarette away. "You asked for it. My name's really Adam White. I'm from Texas; I was born in San Antonio in '81. I'm over thirty. I ran with the border bunch. I've got a hard reputation down there and it's not unearned. I've killed men; I thought I had sufficient reason then, but now I don't know. But if I'm pressed too hard I'll kill again. I'm not wanted by the law but I've nothing to go back to. I'm starting from scratch here and it looks like somebody's making it hard for me. Joseph Candley Morgan for one. Now you know."

She shook her head quickly. "You want to shock me, make me cringe from you. You're doing what you think you should do even if it's what father wants you to do. You want to make it impossible for me to fall in love with you. I like you better for it, Adam, because that's the way my father would do it; straight from the shoulder, as he says. Joseph Candley Morgan—just plain Joe Morgan of Virginia City once. There's a gun in his study with seven notches in the handle. Seven mistakes is what he calls them. Thirty years ago Joe Morgan stood where you stand now. And I think he is the finest man who ever lived."

It came like a splash of cold water on his face. She had the strength and the courage to admit a man could climb from any depth—and she would stand beside him proudly.

But he was not finished. "Your father and I are going to clash," he said. "Morgan owns this country. And I want to plant stakes here. He's going to step on me. He has said as much. I don't like being stepped on."

Marjorie was smiling. "He said he was going to find out what you were made of."

"Then that's the way it will be."

"You mean that. You're not afraid of him." Surprise, something more was in her voice. "I could like you very much, Adam White. But I'm going to spoil it, maybe, by being frank with you. Dad thinks I'm a soft-headed girl. He thinks I'm going to fall into your arms just because you saved me from Todd Krale. I've been kissed before, Adam, and it wouldn't have killed me to be kissed by Todd Krale. I might even have enjoyed it. Who knows?" She laughed.

White felt a flush ride into his face. "I guess that sets us both down, Miss Morgan," he said. "We start square. I don't mind standing up to your father, but if you're standing beside him I reckon I know when I'm licked."

"Who said I would take his side of it?" Her smile was gone. Her head lifted. Her chin was firm, strong. "You said you didn't know a friend from an enemy here. I want to change that. I want to be your friend."

"Thanks again," he answered. "I mean that."

Her smile came back. "Now we'll dance."

They passed Morgan on the way to the pavilion. He was frowning at them. His mouth was set in a firm, ugly line. White nodded soberly as they passed.

The orchestra began a waltz. The swinging melody caught hold of White. The girl was light, and without realizing it, their movements blended perfectly. She looked up into his tanned face.

"You didn't learn to dance like that on the border," she accused, smiling.

"No," he admitted, with a laugh. "New York dancing school. I wore out forty partners trying to learn this one step. They finally refunded my money and handed me a ticket back to Texas."

He was sorry when the dance ended and he had to surrender her to another partner. But Doc Remus came up, mopping his sweating face, to lead him back to the punch bowl. There sounded an uproar beyond the lights. Another fight. Remus grinned.

"Morgan's doin' himself proud tonight," he chortled. "But even the emperor of Montana can't stop the rain. Those thunderheads are piling up."

To the west, above the black mountains,

lightning flickered silently. The massed battalions of dark wind clouds stood in shadowed splendor.

Then Marjorie came back, drawing him away. "Let's sit this one out," she suggested and led the way to one side. A mass of roses clung close to the red bricks of the house here. She was slimly outlined in her white gown. A whisper of wind stirred her hair.

"I want to see you again, Adam White. You can take that as you please."

"Emperor Morgan won't like it," he grinned. "But darned if I won't! You beat me hands down. I'll be around."

She faced him, "It's the unspoken law of the range that you can't ask a man a direct question. But I want to break that law. I never met a man like you and I want to know all about you."

"I told you."

"Not the way I mean." Her chin tipped up. "Are you married—ever been married—ever been in love?"

"I've answered that. I've nothing to go back to."

FOR A moment she was still, then she stepped close to him. His arms went about her waist, bringing her to him. The smell of her perfume was intoxicating. Then her lips pressed against his. For a long moment she held still, then pulled free. He didn't hold her. Her face was odd, filled with wonderment, and her hand touched her lips.

A step sounded close to them. White turned. Morgan stood a pace or two away.

"You're here." He waited, controlling the anger in his voice. "Marjorie, I'll remind you that you are the hostess. You have other guests. I'll thank you to see them."

"Certainly, Father. I'll go. But first I'll tell you this: It won't do you any good to raise ned with Adam. I brought him here—planned it deliberately so he would kiss me."

Then she was gone. White stood still. The presence of Morgan was strong, but the big man remained silent. "I'm not going to order you away," he said, finally. "There are other ways of dealing with men like you, White. I'm warning you, watch yourself!"

"Did you warn Veerman and Franklin, too?" White demanded. Morgan spun on his heel, was gone.

The first drumming roll of thunder drowned out the music. The lanterns began to dance in the wild gusts. He saw faces turn to stare back toward the west. The blank white flash of lightning ripped the darkness. The smell of rain grew stronger. In the sudden silence following the thunderclap, the thudding of hoofs rang out. Down the tree-skirted drive came a party of riders, racing wildly. He saw men, roughly dressed, swing down. Someone yelled out: "It's Tommy Selman!"

Then a light touch on his arm spun him around. Madelon Drake stood there, her face pale. "Adam, I was late. I couldn't find you."

She broke off as he guided her around the side of the house. The music had stopped. Loud voices welled up.

"Here, I thought we settled this!" he said.

"Guess my nerve failed me," she answered. She tried to smile. "Tommy, he's here."

"So I heard." The orchestra went into a fast Virginia reel. "Look here, that galoot of yours might as well know where he stands right now. Are you game?"

Her eyes were wet. "I don't know."

"Ahuh!" he growled. "Listen to me! Any Texan can lick the pants off of any Montana cowhand who ever lived. Remember that! Now come on!"

She made no protest as he led the way to the brightly lighted dance floor. He was aware of a growing excitement as he forced their way to the floor. Madelon came willingly into his arms and they began the sprightly movements of the dance. Then, abruptly, the other dancers peeled away from them. Adam heard a loud shout, and a man came onto the pavilion. He was dishevelled, his eyes wild. Tom Selman was not over twenty-five, tall and heavy-shouldered. The holster at his hip was weighted by a Colt revolver. That he was drunk could not be doubted.

The music went on as if nothing was happening. White heard Madelon suck in her breath in a frightened gasp. He stepped clear of her, pitched his voice loud: "Here, cowboy! Get off the floor or get yourself a girl!"

"I had a girl!" Selman yelled. His face twisted brutally. He stared at Madelon, then at White. He staggered as he came toward them. "At least I thought I had. But I found out different! She was anybody's girl!"

Madelon cried out. The sound made something snap in White's mind. It was not so much that he resented Selman or hated him, as it was that Selman represented the unknown forces that had combined against him here. In a sense he was striking back at the whole scheme as he stepped close to Selman and brought his right fist up. Selman's head flew back and he fell. For a moment he was dazed, then he cursed drunkenly.

"I know you!" he shouted. "A Texas renegade—El Blanco! I know you!"

His right hand chopped down for his gun. A man shouted and Madelon screamed, then White's boot caught the gun and sent it flying away. Adam stooped, came up with Selman. With his open hand he slapped the younger man across the mouth.

"You drunken pup" he snarled. "You're not fit to lick her boots!"

His right hand closed, his arm blurred with motion. He felt the grinding impact as his knuckles struck. Then Selman reeled back to crash into the crowd. White stepped over to him. A second cowhand came across the floor. His face was flushed. White caught him, stopped the motion of his hand toward his gun.

"You one of his men?" he demanded. The man nodded, his face gone pale. White released him. "Get him out of here, then!" he commanded. "And tell him I'll see him when he's sober. You get that?"

The frightened rider got Selman to his feet. They disappeared in the crowd. White saw Morgan, his eyes narrow, a smile on his thin lips. Doc Remus was frowning. Dan Loper was turning away, licking his lips nervously. White caught Madelon's arm. Others just stared.

"Let's get out of here!" he said. The crowd parted to let them go. The lane was clear. He paused there in the darkness. Behind them the music was starting again. He heard horsemen moving down the lane ahead of them.

"That's that," Madelon whispered tragically. "It's all over. He knows."

"You were going to tell him anyway," he returned sharply. "I'll talk to Mister Tom Selman when he's sober."

"There'll be a fight." Her voice was toneless. "You'll kill him."

"Stop riding old trails, Molly," Adam said. "It doesn't pay. This hasn't changed anything. I'm not going to throw a gun on Tom. I promise you that. But I'm going to find out who told him and then I'm going to pound some sense into his hard head."

HER HAND touched his arm, then suddenly she was in his arms, sobbing. He heard running footsteps behind them, then someone called his name. Before he could answer, Marjorie Morgan was upon them. For a moment she didn't see them, then the white lightning flared. He saw her face, shocked, angry, then shadows clamped down.

"Excuse me!" she cried out. "I didn't mean to interrupt." Then she turned and fled back the way she had come. He started to call to her, then stubborn pride held him back. Madelon pulled back from him. Lightning flashed again. She was crying.

"Now I've really ruined everything!" she burst out bitterly.

White felt the first pattering of rain. People moved around them, laughs and yells came as they ran for cover. He took Madelon's arm and started walking.

"Listen to me!" he commanded. "You're staying here. Either you promise me that or I'm going to take you out to the Pine Tree with me, and to hell with what people say or think. You're not going back to Chicago. You're staying right here in Medicine Bend!"

She remained silent during the walk to town. He left her at the hotel after exacting her promise she would not leave Medicine Bend until he saw her again.

After a good night's sleep his mind was clear, sharply alert. The depression, the tension that had held him the day before was broken. He found a growing eagerness to be on his way. He dressed in riding boots and corduroys, buckled on a heavy jacket. He didn't own a slicker, and it would be too early to buy one, but he might be able to get a poncho at the stables. He made his way downstairs in the meager light. It was still raining, but the wind had died. A

steady drizzling rain had set in that might last for days. But White would wait no longer. There was a light in the dining room, and Mrs. Taylor heard his step on the stairs. She still wore the red dress she had worn to the dance.

"Mornin', Mister White," she called out, cheerfully enough. "Some ruckus, that was! Man, you laid it on poor Tommy Selman—an' no more than he deserved, darn his ornery hide! That poor girl!"

An idea struck White. "Mrs. Taylor, Madelon Drake is a fine girl. I've known her a long time. Selman was given a wrong steer by someone. I'm making it my business to straighten him out. But meantime, she'll need a job."

Mrs. Taylor nodded. "An' I'm needin' a girl to help out here," she said quickly. "I'll go over and speak to her today."

He thanked her fervently. She had coffee made, and a lunch packed for him. She also found a slicker, a yellow one. He paid his bill, said his good-bye. He wished he'd had the chance to say good-bye to Doc Remus, and he thought of Marjorie Morgan. But he forced her from his mind.

The rain was a steady drenching downpour. He hunkered against it. The town was dark, only a few lighted yellow window squares shining into the muck of the street. He got his rented horse and rode out of town.

Once into the hills he slowed the horse to a walk. The rain kept up. The road climbed steadily before him.

An hour later the way dipped sharply between two ledges of gray rock. Pines fringed one side, and the gaunt, jagged form of a peak shot abruptly up from the other. For a moment Adam felt an odd hesitancy, then cursing at his own queer streak, urged the horse on. He passed the shoulder of rock.

A noise caught his attention and he looked up. Rain flurried into his face on the wind that whipped through the mountain pass. He bent forward to avoid the rain. At that moment a rifle roared.

His horse stumbled; he felt the solid impact of the leaden pellet striking flesh; then the horse went down. Even as White fell sprawling, the rifle thundered, again and again, and hot lead chewed mud and spat it into his face.

VII

IT WAS not the first time, nor was it the tenth time, that Adam White had been shot at. It was a thing he had been through before, and that was what saved him. He was rolling even as he landed, and his hand filled with the two Colts.

From the roadbed to the outcropping of rock above was less than a hundred yards. The rain was a blurring sheet suspended between White and his assailant. He kept moving. He felt his muddy slicker rip and pull at him as a slug ripped through it, then he was pressed close against the sides of the pass. He could see nothing at first, but it was lighter on the ridge than in the pass, and he waited, guns up.

He saw slow, cautious movement, a man's black-slickered figure crouched low, peering down. The rifle roared. White couldn't tell where the slug struck. His own guns bucked in his hands. Snap firing was useless at that range; but the Mexican system of pattern-firing was designed for that purpose. White's grim smile played on his lips as he emptied first one Colt and then the other in staccato bursts.

He didn't aim for the crouching figure. He shot around it; high, low, right, left. And the rifleman jerked back. White saw the black-cloaked figure stumble, throw up his arms, then fall from sight. He reloaded his guns and waited. The rain beat down steadily, dripping from the brim of his hat, running down his face and neck. Then he caught a muffled curse, the rumble of moving rock and the distant thud of hoofs.

For another five minutes White waited, then began a cautious ascent of the canyon ledge. No rifle shots blared out; there was silence broken only by the humming of the rain-wind through the pass. He found where the rifleman had waited for him. Five shell-cases lay in the mud, and half-smoked brown-paper cigarettes were scattered about. The attacker was gone.

White returned to the road to find his horse was dead. He removed the saddle, lugged it to the side of the road, then carrying his rifle, he started afoot through the pass. It would be useless to return to Medicine Bend; somewhere further on there would be a ranch or house where he might stop. The rain slowed to a misting drizzle,

and the grayness lightened. Two hours' walking brought him to the first real stand of forest. It spread between two arms of the mountains. The point of the forest touched the road and there a mailbox was stuck atop a post. A sideroad angled into the woods. Gray mist clung about the towering pines, shrouding them. The house was not visible but the smell of pine smoke came strong, and he heard the ringing neigh of a horse.

ABEL C. REMUS, M.D. The name was in white letters on the side of the metal mail box. The red flag at the side was up, indicating there was mail in the box to be taken by the postman. White stopped, shifted the rifle from one hand to the other. He was certain he had wounded the rifleman who had attacked him in the pass. The man had ridden from the mountain ledge, undoubtedly to angle back to the road, and he would have passed this point. A doctor and a wounded man!

White bent to study the road leading into the woods. The rain had been steady for nearly twenty hours, and the road was a morass; muddy puddles marked where hoofs had bitten in, and twin lines made by wagon wheels were cut deep, running with water. How recently the tracks had been made, there was no way to tell. But before entering the lane, White left the road, trudged through the ankle-deep mud along the fringe of pine to look for tracks. He found nothing, no sign. He grunted non-committally, looked up at the sky. There was no sign of clearing. He thrust his hand through the pocket-slit in the yellow slicker, loosened his right-hand Colt. He kept his hand on the gun as he walked.

The cabin stood in a clearing. It was backed against a climbing slope, with a rock foundation and a broad front porch. Unpeeled logs made the sides, and the chinking glistened whitely in the wet. Smoke billowed from the chimney, and to one side stood a corral and barn. At the steps White paused. Mud tracked up the middle of the steps, onto the porch; but it meant nothing. Remus could have been out to the barn that morning, or might have a hired hand who had been out. White shook his head.

He raised the heavy iron knocker and dropped it against the door. He caught a fragment of whistled melody, then the door swung open. Abel Remus' face blinked out at him.

"Good lord, it's White!" he exclaimed. "Come in, come in! There's a fire—"

"Thanks." White grimaced. "Got a question first, Doc. You been handling any of your specialty lately? Like this morning?"

Did he hestiate a fraction of an instant? White was not sure. "Gunshot wounds? This morning? No. You been shootin' somebody?"

"I'm not sure," Adam said. He kept his hand on his gun. Remus caught his posture, and his eyes widened. The cabin was large. The unfinished walls were hung with hides, and two mounted deerheads thrust points out into the room. The fireplace was of rock, and a fire roared away. White felt the dryness of the heat on his face.

"I'm alone, Adam," Remus said. "Come in to the fire. Take off that wet slicker." White slipped off the yellow raincoat but his hand was not inches from his gun at any time.

Remus watched him, a thin smile edging his lips. "There's been no one here today. Not a soul. I was outside to the barn to bring in firewood and water. That's all."

"Ahuh. Thanks, Doc." White held out his hands to the fire. "My horse fell. Somebody mistook him for a duck and took a shot at him." Remus made no reply. He brought a bottle of whiskey, poured out a glass. He held it to White. Adam noted that his hand wasn't shaking. The fiery liquor burned all the way down his throat.

"I didn't get a good return shot but I might have winged him. This is the first place I've come to since leaving my horse back on the road dead."

"I see, I see," Remus said quickly. "I don't blame you for being cautious. But no one has ridden in. I'm sure of that. There isn't another place for five miles. The next is Tom Selman's ranch. There's a turn-off some five miles further on."

White nodded. He fished in his shirt for a cigarette; the package was wet. Remus moved to a desk to one side, came back with a package of cigarettes. He held them out. "These were given to me by a feller in Medicine Bend last Christmas," he explained. "Don't use 'em myself. I prefer spikes." He lighted a long, black cigar and puffed noisily.

White thanked him, lit one. It was dry, powdery, and flecks of tobacco stung his tongue. Silence fell between them as White let his cold body soak up the heat of the open fire. Remus spoke first: "Rain's letting up. You'll be riding on?"

"If I can borrow a horse. I left the saddle beside the road. Belongs to the livery stable in town."

"I've got a roach-back mare. She'll break your bones but she'll get you there. I'll pick up the saddle. I've got to get back into town tonight, and I'll return it to the stable and explain." He grinned. "One thing is certain, Adam, come hell or high water, the population will increase."

"Look, Doc," Adam said. "The trouble with being a johnny-come-lately is you can't fit the pieces into the picture. Now maybe you've got a stake in what's going on here. In that case you're not going to talk. And, too, maybe you're not keen on getting mixed up in it."

"I'm not a gambling man, White. I never bet on anything, not even a sure thing. Put it like that."

"Sure. Thanks anyway."

"For nothing," Remus returned sharply. "And that's the truth. I could open my big mouth, Adam, but I'm not sure it would help you any. I know that, and you don't. It puts me in a bad light in your eyes. You're thinking, where does he fit in? What's he got to gain? I'll have to let you figure it out yourself."

"At least that's straight talk, Doc." Adam walked to the window. Water dripped from the eaves. The tangled green forest still held gray vapor locked in close. But the rain had stopped. "Since it's like that, I'll be riding."

"I'll go out with you to the barn." Remus put on a raincoat, held White's slicker while he got into it. He grinned. "When you bring the mare back, bring it yourself. I'm interested in you."

"Enough to pass along advice?"

"Yep," Remus said. He held the door open. "I'll give you one bit of advice. If I was you, young man, I'd ride that mare right back to Medicine Bend. I'd buy me a ticket back East an' I'd forget I'd ever seen Montana."

The mud slogged underfoot as they walked toward the barn. "I don't believe that's what you'd do, Doc," White answered, "but I'd be interested in your reason for saying that."

"I'll bet you would! I'll just bet you would!"

TEN minutes later White rode back down the lane. Uneasy, for no reason he could name, he spurred the horse forward, and didn't slow her until he reached the road beyond the woods.

It started to rain again, and somewhere in the distance thunder rumbled and growled. The mountains were gray slate, striped with browns and greens and blacks, shining with wetness. The forest stands thickened, bordered both sides of the road for miles, and when he passed again through a shadowed canyon passage, he rode with care, eyes straining to catch any movement. Abruptly the canyon ended, and the road edged around a precipitous slope that shot sharply down into a broad valley below. Rain hung as a gray fog in the valley, dimming colors, blurring trees into a solid green wall. Far below a brown streak marked a road, and he saw the spider-thin lines of fencing. A cabin was set in the middle of a clearing, a deserted, forlorn look about it. From the main road another, little more than a rutted trail, led down toward the house. A mail box sat awry atop a leaning post.

Adam wished he had given way to the impulse he had had in Medicine Bend to wire Toby Blake to bring Cud Way and Andy Bright north quickly. But the chances of the telegram finding Blake were thin ones, and he had not allowed the impulse to grow. He shook his head, and the rain flew from the brim of his Stetson. Too late, now!

The mountains—two ranges met here—spread for three hundred miles north and west. A gigantic, wriggly X, and it was at the point of the bottom inverted *v* that the valley spread out. He was following the lower leg of the mountain, going up. Ahead, through the rain-smeared distance, he could see the building heights of the mountains where they met. The road angled sharply up to a pass, and the Pine Tree Ranch lay at the upper broad end of the V-shaped valley beyond. Five hours ride at least, and it was late afternoon; it would be night before he reached the ranch and the reception,

whatever it might be, that awaited him there.

The rain stopped for a few minutes as he neared the summit of the pass. He saw the lightness of the sky to the north, and put a cigarette to his lips as he rode. He went through the pass close against one wall, head lifted, searching the steep slopes to either side, but he saw nothing. The road veered sharply to descend as it left the pass, and there he reined in. The same overpowering sense of illimitable distance, of swelling green-gray mountain rolls, of shallower dips of plateaus and hills, struck at him, but with a deeper significance. To the right of the pass, where a side road angled away into the valley below, stood a magnificent wind-blown pine. On the side of the tree bole facing the road the bark had been removed leaving an irregular squared surface on which was burned a black outline of a pinetree. The Pine Tree brand! The land below him, the great valley that reached north in growing width, was his.

All of ten minutes he sat there, smoking another cigarette, breathing the smoke deeply into his lungs, quieting a growing elation that held him. His land! Even the sound of it was good. The feel of it was better. This was what he wanted, to sit atop a mighty summit and stare down and realize that what he beheld was his, belonged only to him. Land and cattle and trees, and the stormy sky above it, the hanging wisp of rainbow that arched toward the distant mountains.

He pulled up at a barrier set across the narrow road where it bent around a shoulder of the mountain. Barbed wire strands across a massive gate, and a thick plank with a black-painted warning: STAY OUT! followed by the burned-in Pine Tree brand. White dismounted, swung the gate back and rode through. The jubilation was diminishing inside him. Something about that blunt warning.

In the silence of the rainy night he rode without pause. There was a growing stiffness in his legs, and his slicker had allowed rain to seep down his back. Hours passed. It was with some surprise that he saw the faint glimmer of lights ahead. For a moment they seemed twin lines of yellow squares, then his eyes oriented themselves, and he realized that he was seeing two buildings, one closer than the other. The ranchhouse and bunkhouse. Broad corrals stood to either side, and he passed the tall, dark mass of a barn. A horse stomped, and he heard the lowing of cattle nearby. He passed the bunkhouse, a long, low, whitewashed building. The windows were steamed over and he could see nothing inside.

He rode through puddles of water. He heard a door bang open. A man's voice yelled, "Who's out there?"

He didn't answer. He heard the door slam behind him. Ahead the broad, low silhouette of a building loomed up. Rows of windows set back across a wide porch. As he rode up. The front door swung open. He saw a man step through the doorway, metal glinting in his hand.

"Just sit still, stranger!" came the warning. The man's voice was coarse, pitched low. His outline was big, with layers of slab-fat to broaden the shoulders and hips.

"This the Pine Tree Ranch?" White called out.

"What do you think it is?" came the belligerent answer. "What do you want?"

White stepped down from the saddle. He tethered the horse before the porch and walked to the steps. The other man had come out and was waiting for him. He held a gun carelessly in his hand. "I'm White, the new owner. Where's Hanson?"

THE BIG man stiffened. "I'm Hanson. Didn't expect you tonight."

White brushed past him. He caught a glimpse of a dark face, scowling, of a fixed snarl on the lips. Little layers of fat ridged that face to each side of the jaw, giving the man a queer baboonish look. His eyes shifted away from White's but his manner was assured, forceful.

The living room was enormous, with a dark beamed ceiling, and a huge rock fireplace. The furniture reflected the character of the man who had brought it here, broad, massive pieces, covered with calfhides, the mottled whites and reds and blacks shining almost as if wet. Heavy drapes of bright Mexican colors hung at the broad windows. Over the fireplace hung an original Remington painting. With some surprise White recognized the scene as being the view from the pass that opened into Pine Tree Valley.

Hanson followed White into the room. He was in his shirt sleeves. Before the fire a heavy chair had been dragged, and on a table beside it sat a half-empty bottle of whiskey, a partly filled glass beside it. He came across the room, took the glass, emptied it, set it down with a grunt as he wiped the back of one hand over his mouth. "Like I said, we wasn't expectin' you tonight," he repeated. "I was goin' to ride into Medicine Bend for you."

White stood very still. "Didn't Morgan tell you to be in town yesterday?"

Again the coarse, grunting laugh. "Yeah, damned if he didn't!" The heavy jowls shook. He bent and filled the glass with whiskey.

"Put that drink down," White said. For a moment Hanson hesitated, then he raised the glass deliberately to his lips. White stepped in, his arm moved, and the glass flew across the room, crashing loudly into the rock fireplace.

"Hey," Hanson bellowed. "What—"

White swung and landed on the billowy ridge of fat alongside Hanson's jaw. The big man sagged at the knees. His eyes fogged over for an instant, then White moved close, and his gun was in his right hand. He thrust the hard muzzle into the belly of the man before him.

"Hanson, I don't know what your part in this game is, but you've got a choice, level with me or be awful damned dead. I'm not choosey. But get this straight: The Pine Tree has a new boss. Next time you're told to do something, do it fast! Now get out."

For the first time Hanson's furtive gaze settled upon the other. His face was pallid save for a crimson patch where White's fist had struck. He stood stock-still for a moment, then backed away. "If you think this is settling anything—" he began.

"Get out!" White repeated. He brought the gun up with a snap.

Hanson backed toward the door, cursed, and went out of the room. The door slammed behind him. White heard a step on the porch, then another man's voice.

"Hey, boss, somebody must've rode in—"

"Shut up, you idiot!" Hanson snarled.

The footsteps moved away down the steps. White stiffened. The second man's voice—he knew it instantly. It was the man who had threatened him in his room at the Taylor House in Medicine Bend!

VIII

ADAM WHITE sat in a wicker rocker on the broad veranda of the Pine Tree ranchhouse his long legs stretched out before him, his booted feet on the porch railing, his eyes contemplating the blue distance, the purple of the hanging hills that stretched up to snowy tops. His eyes took in the white of bunkhouse and barn, the regular pattern of corrals, the brown streak that was the mountain road to the south; his ears caught the busy rhythm of a working ranch, the lowing of cattle, the ringing neigh of a horse, the clangor of a hammer on an anvil, the song of a rider as he rode in from the range. All the elements of contentment, the satisfying of ambition, were his, and yet unrest plagued him.

For a month he had been the master of the Pine Tree, a month of adjustment, of realization, and at the same time, a month of fruitless speculation. Nothing had happened. There had been no attacks against him. And if Drag Hanson had not been friendly, at least he had been taciturn.

He lighted a cigarette, studying the filmy gray-white of the smoke plume over the mess shack. His eyes narrowed with thought. Some of the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place. Like Jed Blaine; he was a part of this vague scheme against White, but not a major part. A tool in the hand of Hanson? It didn't seem likely. Hanson was big and mean; but he had a limited amount of imagination, and White knew that the brain behind the disorder in Medicine Bend County was a shrewd one.

The pattern of the affair was clear; Tom Selman against Joseph Morgan, and no holds barred. Blood had been spilled in the hanging mountains, and Selman was bitter in his hate. As for Morgan—White's speculations ended there. The situation was like a picture tube you could look through from both ends, and see a different picture each time.

From one point of view it was Tom Selman trying to frame Morgan, to strike at him in such a way his power could not help him; from the other, it was Morgan playing a chess-like game for his own reasons, to

his own ends. And, somehow, neither rang true. White sensed that his own part was mapped out, once he had made it clear he intended coming on to the Pine Tree, and the rest changed to conform. No interference with him had been made; as if those behind the plot were waiting for him to do something. But what?

White sighed, shook his head. Of one thing, only, could he be sure. There would have to be a showdown with Hanson and Blaine. But he would pick his time and place.

Hanson seemed content to let the matter slide, and Blaine avoided him, White knew. Just what would happen when the showdown came, he could not be sure. Of the men who worked the Pine Tree, only two struck him as being on his side. Charley Wong, the cook and houseman, and Tony Velez, the blacksmith, whose hearty strokes made thunderous music on the still air. Big Tony, with his ready grin, and his giant's strength.

A voice cut suddenly into White's thoughts: "A cup of coffee, sir?" Adam looked up. Charley Wong's taut-skinned yellow face was serene, his eyes obsidian pools. He held a tray with a small coffeepot, a cup, sugar and cream. He set it on the small table beside White's chair, but made no move away.

Adam stared at the distant blue mountains, at the scudding bank of white clouds moving over them. "Charley," he asked, "What am I up against here?"

"Trouble," came the reply. "When old Mister Selman he here, big graveyard back of house. Five graves there Charley help Tony dig. All men who think to make trouble for big boss. Bang! Bang! Trouble end. Me think pretty soon byumby bang! bang! Charley dig grave for boss Hanson and Blaine. You betcha."

"Got it all worked out, huh?" White grinned. "Maybe you're right at that."

"Charley right. All time Charley right. You betcha. Bang! Bang! So." The yellow face split in a wide grin. He bobbed his head and shuffled away. White poured coffee, stirred in cream and sugar. He lighted a cigarette. He didn't hear Charley return, but there he was holding up a three-foot section of pine slab. Letters had been carefully burned in:

James "Drag" Hanson
1870—1906
He Started Trouble;
It Ended Him.

"This year, too!" White mused. "Got it all settled, huh, Charley?"

"You betcha! Five months more; plenty time. Charley know."

"Wish I was as sure as you are." He watched the oddly wrinkling face of the yellow-skinned man closely. "You knew Veerman, Charley. Was he the kind to get scared away?"

Charley Wong shook his head. "Me know boss Veerman. Big fella you betcha. No scared. Never. Have fight with Hanson. Big fight. Eeeyah! Plenty damn big fight. Hanson crazy, go to throw gun on Veerman, Blaine stop him. They ride back to boss Morgan. Veerman all-samee alone here. He say, 'Charley, there's a hell of a game going on here and I'm getting a hunch.' That night he ride to Medicine Bend, chop-chop! He say he go to see Morgan. He say, 'I'm going to blow this damn range apart!' That all. You betcha! Damn. Gone. No more Veerman. Byumby, Hanson he come back; Blaine he come back. Allee samee as before."

Veerman, a hard-headed Dutchman, big and tough. Vanishing. White frowned. It was a big country but is any working range big enough to hide a dead man? There would always be the chance of discovery of his body sooner or later. A human body was almost indestructible.

SUDDENLY restless, White left the house. A path led around the big house into the grove of trees behind. He walked restlessly until at the lower edge of the clearing, he came upon two small granite headstones. He bent close to read them. *Cyrus and Mary Selman. Rest In Peace.* Behind them were the graves of the men Selman had killed, the men who had started trouble only to have it end them. The grim ironic humor of the man was evident in that expression. Why would a man with such a clear-cut philosophy of life kill himself? White could find no answer.

He walked slowly over to the single row of graves, read the names, the dates. Six names, six dates scattered over a period of fourteen years, ending half a decade ago.

Selman had buried his last dead enemy the same year he had died. White turned to leave the solemn, silent place, then stopped. *Six graves.* It came with sudden impact. Wong had said that he and Tony Velez had buried *five* men there. And yet there were six graves! He read the names again but none were familiar. A frown furrowed his brow at the thought that assailed him.

Why start with Morgan's selling the ranch first to Bennett, then to Veerman, then to Franklin. The pattern went back farther. Back to Cyrus Selman, seated at his desk, blowing his own brains out. That was what struck the wrong note in his mind! A man like Selman, who had lived through the vigilante days in Virginia City, a man who had laid five enemies in their graves on his own property, a man who had lived by strength of arm and quickness with a gun—such a man could never be guilty of the cowardice of self-destruction. But if Selman had been murdered—

Until now it had lain between young Tom Selman and Joseph Morgan. But Selman had not murdered his father, and Morgan had no reason to. He had beaten Selman in his own way. It eliminated the two most obvious factors left—what? There was only one pattern that fitted all the facts. Drag Hanson, Blaine, the Pine Tree, Tommy Selman, Morgan and Todd Krale's outlaw band. They all fitted into place, and behind that pattern that was suddenly so sharp and clear, stood a vague, misty figure, one that White could not identify nor even imagine. The figure of a man who played a complicated game, a man like Plummer of Virginia City who had built an invisible empire, only to have it crumble about him. Plummer was dead but the pattern was his: Todd Krale and his men to drain the wealth of the county; Tommy Selman to play the role of a foil, a dupe to stir up trouble; and Joseph Morgan of Morgan's Empire to supply the spoils. It was clear. Veerman lay in one of these graves on the Pine Tree. Bennett had been driven away. And Franklin, dragged to death by his horse or murdered as Cyrus Selman had been murdered? Ugly, brutal pattern, limned in blood-red. And the man behind it all? Todd Krale? Drag Hanson?

Suddenly White was cold. The sun had fallen behind a mass of billowing white cloud. The dank smell of rottenness of the woods, the whispering murmur of the trees, the odd noises of the forest. White backed suddenly away, anger tightening his cheeks, his hand swinging low above his gun. He had to make certain first, then would come the showdown with Hanson. The thought was a sustaining force inside him as he retraced his way back to the ranchhouse.

At the ranchhouse Wong was waiting. His yellow face gathered into wrinkles as White came up to him. "Charley, how many graves are there in Selman's private cemetery? Think now, and be sure!"

The Oriental blinked rapidly, then bobbed his head. "Charley know for sure, for ver' damn' sure. Charley dig 'em. Seven time Tony make pine box; seven times Charley dig grave. Boss Selman an' lady—five more."

Much as he had expected it, the shock of truth struck hard at him. White nodded, slowly. "Thanks, Charley. Where did Hanson say he was riding this morning?"

The Chinese shrugged, significantly. "Boss Hanson allee-samee big liar. Say south, side north."

White walked down to the blacksmithy behind the barn. The steady rhythm of iron against iron kept up. Tony Velez was stripped to the waist, his brown skin aglow with sweat, shining with highlights from the fire.

"Buenas dias, patrón," he greeted White, then his wide grin narrowed. "Señor, you look as if trouble ees walkeeng at your side."

"You're not far wrong, Tony," White returned. "I've got a job for you, a hell of a job. I was just up looking at the graves. There are eight of them, Tony. Wong just told me you'd buried only seven people there. I think Veerman is planted in one of them, but I want to be sure. Damned sure."

Velez' mouth pulled down. He wiped the sweat from his face with one huge hand. "Sí, patrón, I understand. You want me to deeg op thees grave, no?"

"That's about the size of it, Tony. But I can't wait for that. I'm anglin' to have it out with Hanson now. I'm cutting the backtrail from here on in; those who ride with me can't turn back. You get that?"

The Mexican nodded. His right hand clenched about the shaft of his heavy hammer, brought it down ringingly on the

anvil. "Sí, amigo!" he declared. "I don' like thees hombre Hanson, bot—" he shrugged. "Eet was not my fight. Now—"

"Now, Tony?"

"Now I theenk eet ees!"

White thrust out his hand and Tony swallowed it in his monstrous grasp. "Bot I theenk Tony Velez ride out weeth you."

"Thanks, Tony, but no soap. I'm going to handle Hanson alone. You dig up that grave. Make sure if it is Veerman, and keep your mouth shut. When I get back we'll ride for Medicine Bend and see what can be done about it."

IX

TWO hours later White was riding down a narrow canyon some miles from the ranch. The day was clear, with the cold of the mountain snow in the snap of the wind. The white tops of the mountains were shrinking in the summer sun, and the grass slopes further down were turning brown. The rocky passage was cleft between two arms of the mountains where they thrust outward into the valley, and ended abruptly on a pine-strewn bench. From where White reined in his horse he could see beyond the pine woods into the valley itself. On the far side of the stand of pine a vaporish wisp of smoke curled up into the sky. It had been with no set place in mind that he had ridden from the Pine Tree, but by keeping to the higher levels he expected to see sign of Hanson or his riders. The smoke was the first indication of life he had seen. He sat the saddle and lighted a cigarette. Somewhere here to the west of the ranch proper was a pass that led to Tom Selman's Flying S.

He urged the horse on, but rode slowly, and halted before he left the tangled undergrowth of the piney woods. He dismounted and walked ahead. He felt a building edge of tension. In the very furtiveness of Hanson's manner there was reason for caution, and with what he now knew and had surmised, he could guess exactly what action Hanson would take against him. One more grave in the little cluster of mounds above the ranchhouse.

He heard the bawling of cattle before he reached the end of the woods. The fire-smoke was strong, and a deeper smell carried with it. The stench of red-hot iron against hair and flesh. The woods broke into a clearing directly ahead of him. White edged back against a pine trunk. A hundred yards away, where the first roll-off of the benchland stepped off toward the valley below, a fire was burning. The long, black handles of branding irons thrust up. Two men were busy branding a calf. Drag Hanson and Jed Blaine. He saw the wetness of Hanson's face as he handled the iron. Hanson stepped back, and Blaine released the calf which ran bawling toward a group of cattle standing down wind from them.

"That's twenty head, Drag," Blaine said, bending to rub the backs of his legs. "Man, is it hot!"

"You don't say?" Hanson returned sarcastically. "It'll be a hell of lot hotter before we're through."

"You know, Drag," Blaine said, "I don't see where we're gettin' the fat end of this hog. Krale's doin' better'n we are. We get maybe fifty head a month—can't take any more or it'd show up too plain. That's maybe eight hundred dollars. Half of it goes to you, and the rest of it's split up between the boys. I get maybe a hundred bucks a month."

"Did you ever make it any easier?" Hanson returned. His fatty-jowled face was dripping sweat as he bent to thrust the iron back into the fire. He straightened, rolled a cigarette. "I know it ain't what it was before that damn' White showed up, but this's just skim-milk. The cream comes later an' if I have any say-so, it ain't goin' to be long from now. There've been too damned many misses. The boss said he was goin' to stop White. That was the understanding, that we'd have the Pine Tree, plain an' simple. And what was another killin' chalked up against Krale? But here White rides in big as life an' twice as nasty."

He sucked smoke into his lungs, let it come out through his nose. "The boss says he's enjoyin' this little game and that he'll take care of White in his own good time but he's draggin' it out too much to suit me. I been thinkin' about speedin' things up a mite. Remember what Franklin looked like a bobbin' at the end of my rope? The same kind of accident could damned well happen to White!"

It was that moment that White's horse chose to neigh. The two men before the branding fire went stiff, and White jumped from the pines, his gun in his hand.

"Howdy, Hanson!" White yelled. He paced forward cautiously. "Remember what I told you? Seems like you don't take to well-meant advice." White jerked an iron from the fire. It was Selman's Flying S brand. "In the old days they used to hang cattle thieves. Nowadays the law won't stand for that, but there's always self-defense, and in about one minute I'm going to see you go for your gun, Hanson, and I'm going to drop you dead!"

The rustler went pale. Blaine seemed to have been frozen by the sudden turn of affairs. His eyes were wide and staring.

"It's not as fancy as draggin' a man to death at the end of your rope, is it, Hanson?" White's smile was hard. "I'm going to make it easier for you, Drag!" His hand dropped the Colt into the holster. His arm was at his side. "There you are, snake! Make your play!"

Suddenly Hanson smiled. The red came back into his face. "All right, sucker!"

White caught the warning in his eyes. He whirled but the movement was too late. Something crashed against his head. But even in that instant his gun had cleared the holster and a single shot sounded as he fell.

The burn of the bullet spun Hanson around. He went to one knee. Curses poured from his mouth. Only the sideward plunge of White's body to the blow had kept that bullet from plowing into his heart. He felt cold sweat on his brow. Krale's mocking laugh sounded as he sheathed the gun he had struck White with.

"That's one you owe me, Drag," he declared coarsely. "I told you this White would be a hard nut to crack. Good thing I rode over to see you today."

Hanson stepped forward and drove his boots into White's side. The fallen man groaned, rolled over. "Blaine, tie his hands! I'm goin' to teach him somethin'!"

WHITE came to, his head spinning crazily. With an effort, he sat up. He saw Hanson before him and the heavy figure of Blaine. Then a third man, big, heavy of build, somehow familiar. Then he heard the voice. "Todd Krale!"

"It's me," Krale agreed. "Man, you must have a head of iron! I really laid it on you!"

White found that his hands had been bound behind his back. His head was still ringing from the savage blow. Hanson bent over and struck him across the mouth. "I'm goin' to kill you, White!"

Krale grunted. "Shore, I reckon that's the only out. But me, I'm out of it. That's yore end of the bargain, Drag. You damned near muffed it, too. The boss ain't goin' to like that. Maybe White's talked. He sounded like he'd figgered things out."

"Are you crazy?" Hanson turned to stare at the big outlaw. "Who'd he have time to tell anything to?"

"Just the same, Drag," Krale returned, "he's got the play figgered, an' if he could do it so can somebody else. But that's your worry. I'm just a hill bandit as far's this racket's concerned. For the first time I'm beginnin' to like it that way!"

Hanson snarled, "Damn it, Krale, I don't like the way you're talkin'."

"Now ain't that too damned bad?" Krale laughed deep in his throat. "Just between you an' me, I don't give a hoot for what you like. But I'm gettin' my cut out o' this mess one way or 'nother. I heard what you was spillin' to Blaine. How'd you like it if I was to let the boss in on it?"

Drag Hanson stiffened. His face went blank, and his eyes burned with killing hate. Then Krale laughed, somewhat hastily, Adam thought. "Hell, I'm just kiddin', Drag," he put in quickly. "What you said makes sense. We been piddlin' around with this deal long enough. Shore, I've made bean money, but now's the time for things to pop. To hell with the boss's big scheme. I'm not goin' to be here to enjoy it anyway. To my way o' thinkin' we'd be smart to grab what we can an' dust out o' here!"

The color came back into Hanson's face. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Krale. Me'n you together can talk some sense into the boss's head. If not, we can shore end this deal in a hurry."

"Ahuh," Krale drawled. His grin narrowed. He jerked a thumb toward White. "What about him?"

Blaine moved. He held a gun level in his hand. "In the head," he said. "Let me do it, Drag. I want to do it."

"No!" Hanson broke the stiff pose he had held. A grin rubbed off on his slack mouth. "I don't like it that way. White, you said it was a hell of a way that Franklin died. Yo're right, it is! It don't make no difference now whether you show up with a bullet hole in your head or not, but I like to be neat. I like to finish what I start. What was good enough for that damned ugly Franklin is good enough for you! Accidents can happen twice. Blaine, get me my rope!"

White saw Todd Krale start, then relax. The bandit's ugly face twisted. He stared at Hanson. "Yo're a dirty hound," he said. "Why don't you kill him clean? There's plenty of drop-offs. Tie him on his horse and drive it over. Make it quick."

Hanson shook his head. "I want to feel him kickin' at the end of a rope. I want to hear him yellin', beggin' me to send a bullet into his head."

Blaine returned with a rope. He hit White with his knee, the blow sending him reeling to his side. His feet were jerked together by the bite of the running noose. Holding the rope taut, Blaine backed toward Hanson who swung up into the saddle. He took the coil of rope, swung it in his hand. His mouth was ugly, torn by the killing emotion that gripped him.

"Get set, cowboy!" he yelled. "You're goin' for a ride an it's goin' to be rough!"

With a strident cry he spurred his horse. White felt the noose bite into his ankles. The jerk snapped his head back into the ground, brought a cry of pain to his lips. Dirt and gravel scraped at his body, ripped his shirt. He spun over, and gravel tore at his face. Then his head struck a rock.

THE pain of the glancing blow blinded him for only a moment, then White tensed his arms, tried to burst the cords that bound his hands behind him. He felt them give, the smashing of his body against the ground having exerted far more pressure than his arms could bring to bear. By twisting, he forced his tumbling body over, and he could breathe. Hanson had not yet forced his horse to a run, enjoying the game too much to bring it to a close, but even so a man's body could absorb only so much of such punishment.

Something gave and White felt his arms swing apart. He fought to swing up into a sitting position and grab the rope but the ground tore him back. Twice the numbing shock of striking a rock jerked him back to the end of the rope. The third time he managed to grasp the rope with one hand. Hanson saw his move, put his horse into a swinging turn that broke White's hold, catapulted him backward into the dirt. In a final desperate try White forced his hand into the tight pocket of his denim britches.

The hard bulge of his pocketknife lay under his fingers. Exerting the last of his waning energy, the seam ripped open and his hand closed about the knife. He brought it up to his mouth, using his teeth to open it. The blade snapped open, cutting his lip. But he had it open! He struck out blindly. The rope parted and he rolled to a tumbling halt. He staggered half-blind to his feet, the knife gripped in his hand.

Like a great black shadow, Hanson loomed up. Adam White heard the shattering roar of a gun. He threw himself to one side. Hanson drove his horse in a turn to come at him again. There would be no dodging this time for Hanson's intent was plain. He was going to ride him down, use the weight of his running horse to crush him!

White braced himself for the numbing shock just as the bark of a rifle sounded in the distance. Hanson pulled in. He raised his gun, and for a moment he held there, undecided. Then a shouted curse burst from his lips and he wheeled his horse and raced away. Two more rifle shots sounded. White saw that tall, grim shape jerk erect, plunge to one side, only to grasp the saddlehorn and reel back. Then he was gone. Hoofs pounded up. White tried to turn to face the newcomers but his legs refused to hold. He went down.

"Damn!" A booming voice yelled. "Suppose we're too late, Cud?"

Cud! Cud Way! White tried to sit up, to open his eyes. Strong arms grasped him and pulled him up. He saw a moon-like, sun-browned face peering anxiously into his own.

"Toby! Toby Blake! You came after all!"

"Yea, an' almost too late," the big border bandit boomed. "You can thank Andy Bright's eagle eyes for spottin' that murderin' skunk afore he kilt yuh shore."

"Cud—Andy—Toby—" White's voice

broke. "Man, you timed it close!"

"Jist like the cavalry, johnny-on-the-spot," Toby Blake growled. "Hell, we-uns figgered that heah yuh was a-sittin' on yore porch wearin' calluses on yore fanny an' a-ridin' the Owlhoot. Didn't make much sense. We figgered we'd jist mosey on up hyar an' cut ourselves a slice o' yore frosted cake. Way it looks now, it's more likely hardtack we got to munch. What the hell was cookin', anyways?"

"Toby, it's a hell of a deal!" White burst out. "The damndest deal you ever heard of. Twice I wanted to send for you but I guess I didn't have the guts to admit I was buffaloed." He felt his body quivering. He could not trust his knees to hold him up. He groped his way to a boulder and sat down breathing hard.

Toby Blake's bright blue eyes narrowed. "Cud, suppose you mosey along a ways an' make shore that hombre don't have no friends close."

Cud Way grinned and spurred off in the direction that Hanson had taken.

"Now, Adam," Toby grunted as he squatted on his heels in front of White, "how about you spillin' the beans? Make it plain. I sent Andy into Medicine Bend while me an' Cud sat out in the hills. What he found out didn't make much sense. Seems like you rode head-on into a mess of trouble."

White nodded wearily. In some detail he outlined what had happened to him since he had taken the stage at Virgil, leaving out only his own feelings regarding Marjorie Morgan. Toby shook his head as Adam finished.

"I don't get it. Shore it's plain thet somebody's tryin' their best to do for you. But what's it goin' to get them?"

"That part of it I don't understand either, Toby. But it's pretty sure my being here on the Pine Tree is throwing a hitch in their doings." He grinned. "That's my side of it, but I'm still wondering what brought you fellows up north."

"Ahuh," Toby Blake grunted. "Waal, I'll make it short an' sweet. After you pulled up stakes the goin' got kind o' tough. Bein' a hard headed old buzzard I got the notion as how I might as well keep on runnin' guns to General Aguilar. Man, that was a mistake! First off, things broke purty good for us, an' we made money. Then it got harder an' harder to fool them damn' cavalrymen. To top it off, I was in Laredo brushin' the foam off'n a schooner o' beer, thinkin' how much I missed yuh, when in comes Ike Whalen o' the Rangers. Me an' Ike, we once rode herd together in Oklahoma, an' he hadn't forgot. He says, nice an' kindly, 'Toby,' he says, 'you just plain natcherly got to quit haulin' guns across the border or we're just plain natcherly gonna have to hang the hell out of you!' He wasn't kiddin', boss, an' thet's for shore!

"WAAL, me an' Cud an' Andy figgered as how we'd take this advice after one last run to line our Levis with foldin' money. Man, we had it. Them Rangers played 'possum and jumped us at the river. Cud stopped a slug with his shoulder. Andy got burned. An' me, I was plumb lucky, I just got my hoss shot from under me. But we run through 'em and got across the river. Yuh know what happened? Thet damned Aguilar was runnin' a bluff. He'd had hard goin' for months an' he was broke. He jist took them guns, with his soldados standin' around lookin' mean an' swingin' machetes, an' didn't even bother to say thanks. Thet done it as far as we was concerned." He blinked, his eyes solemn.

"We headed for Arizona next, did a spell o' ridin' there, then Cud got hisself in a fat poker game, lost his shirt, kilt the crooked dealer, an' got run out o' town. Things jist didn't seem willin' to break right for us. Along about then I got me a hunch. I told Cud an' Andy, 'Wonder how Adam's doin' these days?' Waal, first thing you know, we started moseyin' north. Jist like that. Nobody sayin' nothin', jist ridin' north.

"When we hit Medicine Bend, why we got the hunch thet things wasn't the way they was cracked up to be. An' thet does it."

Andy Bright came over then. "Howdy, boss!" he said. "Reckon we ain't got much to recommend us, but such as it is, we're for hire!"

"You want to stay, Toby?" White asked. "It isn't just for now, for the help you can give me. I want you to understand that. The border is a long way from here in more ways than one. I'll never go back. It means you'd be playing this game for keeps—and by the rules."

X

ANDY BRIGHT watched Toby Blake. The big outlaw rubbed one hamlike hand over his globular features, grunted wryly. "Waal, thet's plain enough for shore! But then we knowed you, Adam, an' we seen when you left Texas you were dead set on bein' honest. While I ain't holdin' no brief for the straight an' narrow, reckon it's about time to call it quits. I'm goin' to be fifty years old soon. I don't feel that old exceptin' in my mind. I got too many memories. I keep thinkin' back on how things was when I was a kid. Back in the '80's it didn't matter so much what a feller did. Some fellers jist natcherly built a big loop an' roped in land an' cattle. I worked for Chisholm, an' knew Maxwell when he was old. I seen Billy the Kid in Fort Sumner, an' if'n yuh was to dig up one o' them old wanted posters you wouldn't see Toby Blake listed with the kid, but yuh'd see my own name. That's the way it used to be. When the railroads came, when the big herds started runnin' north, an' when they started fencin' in the range, thet was the end o' my way o' life. I was jist kiddin' myself, an' Cud an' Andy heah, too, by thinkin' any different. The wild days is plumb over, an' the wild bunch is dead for the most part. So what you say makes sense. I'm speakin' not only for myself but for Cud an' Andy. We chawed this over an' over like a cow chewin' her cud an' it always come out the same way. We're through with the rough stuff. If thet porch o' yore's is wide enough we figger as how the three o' us would be company for each other, what with swappin' lies about what we once did."

A warm, unreasoning flood of sentiment assailed White. He felt a thickness in his throat, a burning of his eyes not caused by the dirt and dust of being dragged at the end of a rope. His hand gripped that of Blake, and the strength of both was in the grasp. Their eyes met and held and they understood one another.

It was dusk before the trio of horses and four riders rode into the Pine Trees. For the last half hour of the ride White had allowed silence to fall between them, and the others respected the seriousness of his mood. A thin edge of anger burned inside him, and the ridges to either side of his jaw tightened. The main ranchhouse was dark but the bunkhouse below was ablaze with light. No one challenged them as they rode up. The building was empty. White rode up the slight slope to the house. Two men stood on the porch; Tony Velez and Charley Wong. Tony carried a rifle. The Chinese held a bell-mouthed duckgun in his short arms, and an uglier weapon White had never seen.

"Okay, Charley!" he called out.

"Boss!" Wong's cheerful voice intoned. "Dam, Boss. Glad see you!"

Tony Velez' giant frame bent as he came down the stairs. "Patrón!" he cried out. "Hanson was here. He go, muy pronto! Take riders weeth heem!"

White dismounted stiffly, aware of the throbbing of his shoulders and body. But the soreness was largely muscular. His strength was unsapped. Wong's bright eyes shone as he saw White's bruised face, and the Chinese vanished, to reappear in a moment with a basin of water. White washed gingerly, dried himself. He felt better, his head clear save for a thin pounding in his temples. He stood still for a moment on the porch. Chairs stood in silent array, inviting. He shook his head, bitterly. Toby Blake caught the gesture, grinned.

"There'll be plenty o' time for sittin' when this heah deal's played out!" he grunted. "But me, I'm hungry. My belly-button's rubbin' holes in my backbone."

"Wong," White began, but the Chinese bobbed his head, quickly. "Me fix!" he promised, and vanished. Tony Velez held still, his dark face troubled. White faced him. "You do that job, Tony?"

"Sí patrón!" Tony quickly made the sign of the cross. He shook his head dourly. "Eet was Señor Veerman. Same ring as Veerman always wore."

"What killed him?" White felt a sudden building of tension as proof of what he had surmised was put before him.

Velez shrugged, his face puzzled. "Not sure," he answered. "No bullet, no knife wound, notheeng. Bot dead just the same! Eet look like he might 'ave been grazed across the shoulder weeth a bullet; bot not too bad. Not keel heem, thot for sure."

White felt Toby Blake's quizzical gaze upon his face. He shrugged. "That's the way it is; at least we know what happened

to Veerman."

"Shore," Toby put in. "Thet damned Hanson got him."

"Maybe," White replied. "I've got a queer hunch we'll find out someday." He rubbed at his chin thoughtfully. "Tony, load Veerman's body into the buckboard. Wrap it in a tarp. I'm going in to Medicine Bend tonight."

"Sí, patrón!" The Mexican jumped to obey.

Toby scratched his massive jaw. "What's the play, Adam?"

"I'm not sure," White admitted. "But I do know this, we've got to get moving, and stay moving. Whatever is behind this, it doesn't take into account what we do from here on in. I'm taking Veerman into Medicine Bend and drag this business into the open. Veerman's dead, murdered. We've proof of that." He paused. "I have an idea that bringing Veerman in will start the ball rolling. I just hope we don't get in the way of it too soon!"

"Yea," Blade added, grimly. He spat over the porch railing and wiped his chin. "It'd be plumb bad if we was to wind up fightin' a war with this whole damn' country. An' I'm gettin' a feelin' thet's exactly what somebody wants!"

DRAG HANSON put his horse to the shale ridge, his lean figure bending back to the pitch of the climb. His face was darkened by an angry frown, and he rode with a lack of the customary caution he used in approaching Todd Krale's hideout. The sudden bark of a rifle fired in warning came as no surprise, and he reined in impatiently.

"Krale!" he yelled. His voice caught in the tortuous canyon walls that angled sharply back into the mountains, and re-echoed piercingly. From the half-hidden cabin set back in the canyon came an answering yell.

"Okay, Whitey, let him ride in!" Krale's voice boomed out.

As Hanson rode up, Krale came out grinning. "I been expectin' yuh, Drag. What kept yuh?"

"Where the hell did you get to?" Hanson demanded, angrily. "Didn't you hear them shots?"

"I shore did, Drag, an' I reckon I had enough sense to dust out of there. Killin' White wasn't my end o' the deal. I told you that you was bitin' off a hell of a big piece of raw meat. I take it yuh didn't finish White?"

"Yo're damned right I didn't!" Hanson flashed. "Three riders showed up. White had a knife an' got loose. I tried to ride him down, an' damn' near got mine instead. I rode right into them. A slug dug a furrow across my saddle, that's how close it was."

"Yeah?" Krale laughed. "Looks like yuh muffed it all around. Maybe yuh should have let Blaine put a slug into his head."

"I'll take care of that myself!" Hanson raged. "You an' that yellow-bellied Blaine, dustin' out like that!" He caught himself, shrugged. "To hell with it. It's done. There was hell to pay at the Pine Tree. I meant to burn it out before White could get back, but that damned Mex an' Chink stood me off! The game's up as far as the Pine Tree is concerned, an' I reckon the boss ain't goin' to sing sweet about it."

Krale guffawed. "Why not listen to him an' find out for yourself?" he demanded. "He's sittin' inside waitin' for you!"

Hanson's face paled. He moved past Krale without a word. Krale followed him into the cabin and kicked the door closed.

A man standing before the fireplace, hands extended to the warmth, swung about, slowly. "You got here, finally."

"Look, boss—"

"Shut up, Hanson," the man said. "It's all right. When you play a game you expect your opponent to make surprise moves. I'm ready for White. He can do no harm. He wants to bring it out into the open now. That's his only move. He's fighting shadows; he doesn't know a friend from an enemy. That's the way I'll keep it for as long as the game lasts. And that won't be long." A smile twisted across the man's face. "You're getting impatient, Hanson—both you and Todd, here. I don't mind that. It will serve to keep you on your toes. But I want you to understand something. For you and Krale this game means money. That's all. It's more to me. It isn't to be figured in dollars and cents. Money is just a small part of it. I'm going to break a strong man, Hanson. I'm going to make him come apart at the seams and it's going to be worth waiting for. It's what I've waited for for a long,

long time. Because I'm going to make that man's strength mine. I'm going to stand in front of him and tell him what I've done, and I'm going to laugh. He's spent a lifetime building an empire—for me! There's my game, and it's coming to the final stages. Only a few more moves."

He turned back to the fire, his eyes bright, shining. Hanson glanced quickly at Krale, and the outlaw was licking his lips, his face worried.

"Go get your horse, Hanson," the man before the fire said. "Ride over to Selman's spread. Talk. Spill your guts to him. You know what to say. Tell him exactly how his father died, and make it good. Now get out!"

Hanson waited a moment longer, but the other man remained immobile. Krale's shake of the head came, quickly. Hanson moved outside. A few moments later the thunder of his horse's hoofs rang out. The man before the fire turned to the outlaw; he was smiling. "Todd, how would you like to rob Morgan's bank?"

FOR Adam White it was a long, lonely ride into Medicine Bend. The physical loneliness of the majestic mountains pressed in upon him, a silence that was almost tangible, broken only by the whirring hum of the steel-tired wheels of the buckboard behind the steady clip-clop of the team. He rode alone by choice, and against Toby Blake's judgment; but the sense that the game in which he had been plunged had reached a point beyond immediate and direct action against him was strong. Almost, he could sense the moving forces against which he made his way. Like shadows in the black of night, intangible but dangerous.

Veerman's body lay wrapped in a tarpaulin behind him in the bed of the wagon; a man who had lost in this same bitter game that White now played. But Veerman had not seen the shape of things as White now knew them.

He broke the thought off with a start. Far below him, set in the black shadows of the mountains, that stood in unbroken array about it, twinkled the light-diamonds of Medicine Bend, a pattern on jet velvet, irregular, blinking, changing. And here the road lurched sharply down. He was forced to use his foot on the brake rod to pull in the team. And for the hour-long descent he had time for no thoughts other than the problem of keeping two half-wild mustangs on the rutted road through the canyon maze. Off to one side, as he neared the town, he saw the lights of Morgan's Castle, and an insane urge to see Marjorie Morgan struck at him but he fought it down.

It was after eight when he drew up before the two-story, false-fronted adobe building that served Medicine Bend as both law court and jail. Yellow light that seemed almost thickened like curdled cream after the silver-gray thinness of the night, spilled outward across the boardwalk. He looped the reins over the hitchrail, noted the array of horses tethered the length of the street, and pursed his lips in a silent whistle. It looked like a big night in the making for Medicine Bend.

He crossed the boardwalk and rapped on the door over which a white-lettered sign proclaimed: TOWN MARSHAL. Without waiting for a reply he opened the door. Two men were in the office. White recognized Dan Loper sitting at a rolltop desk. The second man was Doc Remus. Remus got up smiling.

"Well, Adam White," he said. His grip was strong. "I'm glad to see you, man."

"Thanks," White returned. "Sorry I didn't get back to see you as soon as I expected. Been busy at the ranch."

"So I heard," Remus smiled. "The word's out. I don't think anybody's surprised at you tying a shingle to Drag Hanson's tail. It was bound to come off sooner or later."

"That's not why I'm here," White said grimly. He faced Dan Loper. The Marshal's thin face drooped and his mouth twitched nervously. "I rode in to see Loper. I understand the sheriff stays at Virgil and leaves this end of the County to Loper. Well, I've got a job for him—murder."

"Murder!" Loper started to his feet. "Now wait a minute—"

"Veerman," White went on. "He was killed and buried on the Pine Tree. I've got what's left of him in a tarp in the buckboard."

"Are you certain it's Veerman?" Doc Remus frowned. "I'm coroner of Medicine Bend, Adam, I'll have to know."

"No doubt about it," Adam returned.

"Velez and Wong identified him. I guess there'll be others who can, too."

Remus grimaced. "I guess that tears it. 'Course everybody and his dog knew that Veerman was dead; but this is laying it on the table. How was he killed? Shot, I suppose?"

"No." White shrugged. "I figured that you'd be able to answer that question seeing that you're the coroner."

Remus grunted. He glanced at Loper. "Have somebody bring the body in, Dan," he ordered. "I'll look at him tomorrow. One more day won't matter to Veerman, that's sure!" He waited for Loper's nod, went on: "Adam, I take it you're going to be around town? There'll have to be an inquest."

"Yes," White replied. "I want to see Morgan before I go back."

"Fine. Then I'll ask if I can buy you a drink?"

"I can use one, Doc," White agreed. He felt a weak trembling in his legs. The beating and the long ride had combined to strike hard at him.

"It's my turn to tell you something, Adam," Remus said as they reached the walk. "Jed Blaine's in town shooting off his mouth. I gathered that Hanson's ridden to young Tom Selman's. And that means trouble for you. This may be the match to the powder keg."

"You know something Doc?" White declared. "I just don't give a damn! I'm sick of trouble. I've seen too much of it. I've come three thousand miles to get away from it, and that isn't far enough. Well I'm not going any further. To hell with Drag Hanson and Jed Blaine and Tom Selman and all the rest of them!"

The wind spun tiny whorls of dust about them as they crossed the street. The jangling of the piano swelled as Remus pushed ahead into the saloon. White followed. Tobacco smoke clouded the air, and the room was warm from a potbellied stove set on a tin plate against one wall. The end of the bar near the door was empty, the rest crowded. They made their way to the cleared space.

"Whiskey," Remus ordered. "Bring my own bottle."

The bartender nodded, wiped the bar with a damp cloth, set down two shot glasses and a half-full bottle of amber liquid. Doc Remus filled the glasses, White's hand held a tremble as he brought the smoky liquor to his lips. He drained the glass, set it down.

"One thing bothers me, Doc," White said. "I've lived most of my life in towns like this. I've seen a lot of dead men. I've seen men shot and knifed and hung and beaten with a whip but Veerman's the first man I've seen dead without a killing mark on him."

Remus tasted his whiskey. He sighed and brought out a cigar.

"Good liquor and good tobacco go together," he said. "That's more than facts do, sometimes. I have no answer for you now. Tomorrow, well, we'll see."

White raised his glass. Then a motion in the room stilled his movement. Men moved back from the bar slowly, silently. The piano stopped. The mumbled roar of the gathered men diminished, died away. The thickness of the smoke seemed to treble in the glaring yellow light. Then the last men moved back from the bar leaving one burly figure at the far end. He was turned, facing White. His brutish face was twisted by an ugly snarl. His right hand rested on the butt of a Colt revolver. It was Jed Blaine and death stood clear in his eyes.

XI

A SENSE of unreality was strong upon Adam White as he stood still, the glass of whiskey in his hand. The trembling of his hands had ceased and it seemed as if he stood apart to watch this melodramatic denouement unfold. Jed Blaine's face was blood-flushed, his thick lips sneering, blue veins standing out across the back of the hand gripping his gun.

White felt Doc Remus at his side, unmoving. "This is what I meant, Doc."

A chair scraped in the back of the room. A man coughed. Blaine's face was shadow-red, the color of dying coals in a fire. The smoke was his only background, and he seemed to sway.

"Here it comes, sucker!" Blaine yelled, and the rippling movement of his arm brought his Colt revolver out level.

White's hand dropped the whiskey glass as it moved down and up. He saw a red blossom at the tip of Blaine's gun, then a thunderous roar sounded. The amber

whiskey bottle at his right burst into a million fragments. The acrid smell of gun smoke mingled with the bitter stench of sour mash whiskey. White's arm jerked to the recoil of his gun as Blaine's second shot dug a gray-white furrow in the dark wood of the bar. Impression flooded in a wave upon White. He saw Blaine stiffen, his arm drop to his side. His left hand gripped the bar, slid along the edge as he fell slowly back, sagged to one knee, then pitched to the floor. The wood-shavings strewing the floor beneath him turned red.

White sheathed his gun. His hand was trembling again. "I'll need another glass, Doc," he said.

Doc Remus let his breath out in a sudden wheezing gasp. Blaine's shots had missed him narrowly. He mopped at his forehead, and his glasses were gray with steam. "Hell, yes!" he burst out. "And we need a new bottle, too!"

Men moved back. The odd intensity of the smoke seemed to thin. The walls of the room snapped back into focus. The piano started to jingle again. Remus turned to the bartender. "Mike, send somebody over to get Loper. He'll have to know about this. I guess it's plain enough that Blaine fired first."

White fought down an urge to drink. He let his glass of whiskey remain untouched on the counter. Doc Remus, respecting Adam's mood, remained silent. Minutes passed.

The swinging doors parted and Dan Loper came in.

"Blaine's dead," Remus said. "He forced White to draw, fired first."

"Yeah," a man seconded. "Only he didn't shoot straight enough!"

White caught the sound of running horses. Why it held a sudden sharp meaning for him, he didn't know. He watched Loper.

"You want to charge me, Marshal?" he asked.

Loper put a hand over his mouth; the hand was trembling visibly. His eyes evaded White's. "Reckon not."

The outer doors swung open and men came in. White saw Drag Hanson and Tom Selman. The younger man had a gun in his hand. Loper spun about. For an instant Adam thought he saw an expression of relief on the Marshal's face.

"Maybe you've got no charge against him, Loper," Selman yelled, "but I have!" His eyes were glazed with insane hate.

"Here, now, Tommy!" Doc Remus gasped. "Don't go off half-cocked!"

This is it! a voice inside White's head whispered. This is what the whole play has led up to.

"Keep out of this, Doc!" Selman warned. "This is between me an' White!"

White forced a smile to his lips. "Don't say anything you'll be sorry for," he said hoarsely. "I killed a man a few minutes ago. I don't want to lay you beside him!"

Selman's gunhand remained steady. "Get his gun, Doc!"

"Don't try it!" White flashed. His hand was tense over his gun.

"Tommy! He's sure death!" Remus cried out. "Use your head, boy"

"I am using it, Doc. For the first time my eyes are opened. I can see. No more dust in the way. It's clear now—and awful damned ugly!" His voice trembled.

White didn't wish to kill Selman, a man against whom he held no real grudge, and his own chances of remaining alive five seconds after he dropped Selman were negligible. For Hanson was ready and waiting.

With a suddenness that came as a shock, the situation was removed from his control. Doc Remus caught White's arm and he jerked White's gun from the holster. Then he jumped between White and Selman.

"I don't want you to hate me for this, Adam," he hissed. "But I can't see you two young idiots down each other for no reason at all."

So swiftly had Remus acted, the initiative was gone from the two principals. And yet the set of Selman's face remained unchanged. His mouth tightened and the gun in his hand held steady.

"I can kill White by shootin' through you, Doc," he said, coldly. "Get out of my way!"

"That would be murder, Tommy," Remus returned. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow. His eyeglasses were misted again.

"Would it?" Selman cried out. "What do you call it when he shot my father dead at his desk?"

"You're crazy, boy!" Remus roared. "White wasn't in Montana then."

"That's what he says, Doc. I've heard otherwise." Selman balanced on his toes. A deadly calm had settled over him. White had seen the killing frenzy work that way on other men. "Maybe you don't know Mister Adam White as he calls himself. Well, I know him! Maybe his name's White an' maybe it ain't. But he's got a record in Texas that reaches from El Paso to Brownsville! They call him El Blanco down there, and the name's enough to chill your blood. Gunfighters shy away from you when you say it. What was another dead man to him! His gun's for hire, an' killin' comes cheap."

Remus held still. "Can you prove that, Tommy?"

SELMAN'S face broke for the first time, twisted with hate and fury. "I'll do better than that, Doc! I'll let you prove it. I always knew that Hanson knew more than he'd come out with. He knew what he faced by bucking Morgan an' his hired killer. But he couldn't take it any more when Morgan ran his gunslinger onto the Pine Tree to barbwire Hanson into a showdown. White killed Blaine tonight. Hanson would be next. Hanson and every other man who knew anything about Morgan's crooked play. White's been working behind the scenes with Morgan for years, killer an' boss. Doc, what about the bullet you dug out of my father's head?"

Remus stiffened.

"It's a thirty-two calibre, ain't it, Doc? Ain't it? Come on, you can't hold back for Morgan any longer!"

Remus twisted his head to see White. His eyes were blank behind the misty glasses. "That proves nothing, Tommy," he said.

"The hell it don't!" Selman roared. "It proves my father never shot himself! I ask all of you, would Cyrus Selman be packin' a toy pistol like a thirty-two? That's what killed him an' I've got Hanson's sworn statement that there's a gun like that in White's things at the Pine Tree. A hold-out they call it on the border—a little, dirty, murderin' thirty-two!"

As if wilting beneath the sledge-hammer blows of Selman's accusation, Doc Remus stepped back. Loper stood rooted to one side.

Selman took a step forward. "White, I'm going to see you dead. I'm going to put the noose around your neck with my own hand and throw my weight against the rope to string you up. You can take this thought to hell with you: Your boss won't be far behind!"

"Hold it!" Doc Remus was stiffly erect, White's heavy revolver in his hand, the muzzle in line with Selman's heart. "Tommy, we've all seen what mob rule leads to. You'll do no lynching in Medicine Bend! Loper, back me up in this!"

The marshal licked his lips. "Now looky here, Tommy, maybe you got a case against this feller an' maybe you ain't. But lynchin' ain't the answer."

"It's my answer?" Selman thundered.

"It's your death, Tommy, if you persist in this madness," Remus warned. "I swear I'll shoot you dead if you don't get out of here. You know I mean it!"

White saw Hanson grasp Selman's arm, whisper one word. Adam read his lips; the word was *"wait!"* Selman fought for self-control. His hand holding the gun lowered an inch, then sagged to his side. Staring at Doc Remus as if he had never seen the small medico before, he spoke to Loper.

"Dan, what are you going to do with this killer?"

Loper seemed to be trying to swallow a lump in his throat. He looked at Remus, and the doctor nodded. "White will go to the jail, Tommy," he said. "He'll stand trial for any charge you can muster against him. I'll answer for that."

Selman was silent, then suddenly, without holstering his gun, he spun on his heel. Hanson stepped behind him. The others who had come with him followed. The swinging doors bounced rhythmically behind them. Adam felt the coldness of the night wind on his face. His head seemed muzzy, like in a dream.

"I'm sorry, Adam," Remus said. "It was all I could do." White felt the weight of his revolver as it was thrust back into his holster.

"You saved my life—and Selman's," Adam said. "Thanks."

Loper evaded White's eyes. "I'll have to take yore gun."

Adam hesitated. Remus said: "Give it to him. It's the only way. Selman has nothing more than a wild yarn back of him. It will

blow over. But it's best for you to be in the jail for both your sakes."

White handed his gun to Loper. The marshal waited. Adam stepped through the doors.

Doc Remus walked beside him. "Hanson's going to try to stir up the town. There are plenty of people here who remember Cyrus Selman, and will back Tommy's play. But Hanson's gone too far by naming you as Morgan's agent. He's brought Morgan into this as much as you. Morgan will have to back you now, all the way!"

The words sent a thrill up White's spine. There it was once more, the cunning double-move that brought hidden forces into play. Without choosing, without knowing why, he was now linked, life-or-death with Morgan of Morgan's Empire!

Remus went on, urgently. "I'm going to Morgan right now. He's been riding the clouds too damned long. It's time he got jolted back to earth. He won't like it, but he'll have to fight back. For his own sake he'll have to make sure you get a fair trial." The doctor hurried off.

White and the marshal crossed the street to the jail. The marshal said nothing, but he stopped in the office long enough to pick up a ring of keys. "All right, get up them stairs!" he ordered. His face had changed, oddly. He held a gun in his hand. The change was sudden. Meanness rode his eyes like dust on the wind.

The stairs were clean, as was the long room above the court room. A single row of cells opened off the long corridor. Three of the barred doors stood open. To one cell Loper led the way. He locked the steel door on White, stood still in the corridor beyond for a long instant. Then a crooked grin split his face. He spat to the floor.

"There you are," he grunted. "But don't count on it for long!" He moved back down the corridor. A steel door slammed behind him.

White sank down on the single cot in the cell. Someone was snoring from an end cell. He lowered his throbbing head into his hands, only to perk it up once more.

"Howdy, White!" a deep voice said, mockingly. The man in the next cell moved up close against the bar-wall. It was Todd Krale. A grin transfixed his face. "I reckon yo're some surprise at seein' me in this yere calaboose. Never figgered myself I'd see the inside o' this tin pokey but cain't say as I mind much. I been in better an' worse, with lots worse prospects o' gettin' out."

He never had a chance, White saw that now. The net was strong, with every loop welded into place. Even here the moves had been foreseen, and the animate pawns placed in final position. But the shock of seeing Krale here did one thing: it cleared the cobwebs from his brain, made the blood surge freely into his head. He laughed bitterly.

"I've seen some crooked plays in my time, Krale, but this beats them all hands down. When I dug up Veerman and brought him in I thought I had your boss where it hurts, but he figured it out ahead of me. And then Doc Remus kept young Tom Selman from salting me away, and I thought that was one more move out of step, but it's been figured, too. Your boss doesn't miss a bet, does he?" Krale guffawed with real humor. "Hell, no!" he barked. "I'm here to see you don't start nothin' that somebody else cain't finish." His hand moved into his shirt and came out with a Colt. He held it out for White to see, then thrust it back.

"I've got ten thousand dollars, Krale," White said. "I'd pay that for a six-gun right now. Just to have a loaded gun in my hand I'd pay ten thousand dollars."

"Ahuh." Sobered, Krale studied him. Then he groaned. "Hell, I cain't oblige, White. You don't know all the angles, but I'm on the inside. What I see makes ten thousand dollars look small."

But there was a doubt in his mind, Adam saw. "Think it over, Krale," he admonished, and lay back on the hard bunk, closed his eyes. There was a thin hammering at his temples, and he had the sickening feeling that in the last few hours he had overlooked a detail that would bring the shadowy chessplayer from the darkness and stand him clearly before his mind. One thing was evident: this time the schemer had been forced to guard against the unexpected; that meant there was still a chance, no matter how remote, that White could upset the applecart. For this one time, the pattern was set, unalterable. His head throbbed and ached with the intensity of his thought. With his eyes closed, he heard Krale pacing nervously in the next cell.

Then Krale called his name softly. White sat up.

XII

"YUH know what's goin' to happen, White?" He laughed, but there was no humor in his face. "They're goin' to hang you. First Drag's goin' to get Selman redeyed, roarin' drunk, then he's goin' to start talkin' about how Morgan runs things in this man's town, an' that it's a cinch you'll be turned loose. Then he'll keep talkin' about how you killed old man Selman. Young Tom ain't goin' to take much urgin'. He's been bustin' for three years to kill somebody an' this's his chance. They'll come marchin' into this tin pokey an' drag yuh out into the street. Somebody'll come up with a rope. I reckon it'll be Drag since he's so damn' handy with 'em, an' first thing yuh know, yuh'll be swingin' in the breeze."

If Krale expected him to wince or turn pale at the brutal recital, Adam gave him no satisfaction. He watched him for a moment, then rolled a cigarette; his hands were steady. He shaped it and placed it between his lips. Then through the bluish cloud of smoke he spoke: "Who's the boss, Krale? Of them all, I'm only sure it isn't you. You're too damned dumb to be bossing this show." Krale grunted as White went on: "You haven't even enough sense to realize you're getting the short end of this thing. That's what I can't figure. With ten-thousand iron men sitting right next to you, all you have to do is reach your gun-hand through these bars for it—and you're too damned dumb to do it."

"Shut up!" Krale flashed. "I'm gettin' my cut. I'm gettin' plenty. More than that, I'm blowin' the dust of Montana off'n my hide tonight! Get that straight."

White smoked thoughtfully. "A man smart enough to figure a way to beat a mountain lion like Morgan in his own hills is smart enough to not let a guy like you get away from him. You know too much, Krale. You think it's all over. You think this is the pay-off and you'll ride free! I'm laughing at you, Krale. I'm busting my gut laughing at you. Because you're going to be just as dead as me. And I'll lay you ten to one it's within a half-dozen hours of the time I stretch rope."

Krale's hand made a claw as he gripped the bars of the wall separating them. "Talk," he said. "That's all that's left for you. But I'm goin' to put you straight. You know what happens to a town after they's a lynchin' bee? Men walk like lobo wolves when they're in a mob, but when it's over the dingoes run for cover. A half hour after you dangle from some porch by yore neck, Medicine Bend's goin' to be a dead town. I'm goin' to set right here until after you get yores. Then I'm walkin' out. The door ain't locked. I'm walkin' out an' my boys will be waiting. We're goin' to clean out Morgan's lousy bank, an' then we're ridin' to hell out o' here. An' that'll be the end o' that! Clean as a whistle an' twice as keen!"

White ground out the cigarette as Krale lapsed into silence. If there were time it might be possible to break Krale down but Adam had no doubt that he'd not be given the time. He lay down and closed his eyes. There would be no stopping Selman once he tasted blood. He'd try to get to Morgan tonight, too. The game would be closing fast. Only Selman left to wipe the slate clean, and Morgan's Empire would belong to—whom? That one shadowy fact was still missing. White tried to visualize Hanson's face behind the figure, or even Selman's, but nothing came clear. Loper? Behind the whole thing? It made sense in a queer sort of way.

Almost without realizing it, the toll of the day's happenings struck at him, and Adam slipped off to sleep.

He awakened with a start. His head was beaded with sweat, and his body was cold, aching with pain. He sat up. He saw Krale's ugly face in the shadows of the next cell. Krale's head was cocked to one side as if he were listening. Then White heard it, too, the growing rumble of sound that had awakened him.

A swelling, gathering, humming noise, like a horde of bees disturbed by the clawing swing of a grizzly's paws at a hollow log. Echoing, buzzing tumult. He could sense it in the vibration of the steel bars, in the quivering of the wooden floor beneath his feet. Voices, the spilling, rumbling sound of many men. Anger and hatred and blindness. Inhuman, like the roar of a gigan-

tic, brainless beast, sweeping down the dark streets of the town. The buildings muffled it, blurred it, but the noise grew louder and louder.

White moved to the single iron-barred window of the cell. He could see the street by pushing his face against the bars. Tar-barrels on the walk had been ignited, casting a lurid red glare over the scene. Men milled about in an ugly mass. Then, as if moving of one accord, broke for the jail. Shouts roared out. Someone emptied a revolver into the air. Then a door below went out with a crash that shook the building. The sound of men's voices was a living force in the jail. White saw Krale, cowering back in the shadows of his cell. The outlaw had no wish to be recognized, for a mob in a hanging mood might be tempted to stretch his neck, too. White saw the metallic gleam of the revolver in his hand, ready.

Then the door at the end of the corridor burst apart, went down. White saw the long form of Loper catapulted across the corridor. His face was scratched, and he fell back against one wall, then scuttled for the far end of the jail-block. Men boiled into the cell hall. Faces were blurred, indistinct. Then he saw Selman and Hanson at his side. Hanson was grinning. He carried a heavy hempen rope in one hand.

"Here he is, boys!" he yelled.

The human tide swept down. From somewhere a heavy iron bar was thrust forward by eager hands. White backed to the rear of his cell. He felt sweat on the palms of his hands. His throat felt dry. At Hanson's direction, the iron bar was thrust between the cell and the door. Leverage was applied. The door groaned, then something snapped, and the door burst inward. Hanson was the first into the cell. For one instant he was alone, and in that instant, White struck. Hanson tried to throw up his arms in defense but he might as well have tried to stop the impact of a .45 slug.

White's right caught him, jerked him back, then the left exploded on his nose. Hanson sagged down, and if others behind him had not caught him, he would have fallen. Then Hanson was gone, swept back. Hands struck at White, and he fought back. He felt his shirt rip. One ham-like fist struck his temple. Others jerked in, smashing him. He hit back, felt a nose give beneath one blow, then the sheer weight of the men in the cell made action impossible.

Like a dark receding tide, the human flood left the cell, and White was dragged with them. Down the corridor, down the stairs, into the mob of men who clamored and yelled outside the jail. Hanson was gone. Selman had been forced away by the pressure of the gang of men. But someone had Hanson's rope. Down the street they dragged White. Before the Taylor House they stopped. White caught blurred glimpses of fright-white faces at windows. But there was no sign of Morgan or his men. Doc Remus had failed him!

Hands jerked his arms behind him and rawhide cords tied his wrists. Someone struck him heavily across the face. "That's for a dirty stinkin' Morgan killer!" the man screamed.

Then White felt the press of men give way as something forced its way through them. A shout went up. "Here's a horse!" Something about the voice of the shouter was familiar, but the ringing clamor in his brain would not let him think clearly. The mass of men moved, shoved aside as three horses pushed through. Two horsemen, and a saddled horse meant for him to ride to hell upon! He struggled to burst free but to no avail. The horses pressed in close, hands grasped him roughly under his arms, and others boosted him. He was thrust into the saddle. A hand steadied him and a voice rang out: "Get a rope over that porch beam!"

White, through blurring eyes, saw a yellow length of new hemp thrown up to loop over the projecting beam of the hotel porch. A noose dangled before his face. The man mounted beside him bent close. He caught the loop, opened it, slowly, as a shout of anticipation rang out from the gathered mob.

Then White's vision cleared. He saw the growling yellow-red flares of the tar-barrels, the white of that upturned sea of faces, eyes staring into his, hungering for his death. Then the man beside him pressed close. His face was bearded, and he was grinning broadly. For a moment shock and surprise caught White, made the whole thing seem unreal. Then the scene steadied, and new hope burned in his heart. For the

man beside him was Toby Blake!

"Okay, pard!" Blake hissed in his ear. "In about one half minute I'm gonna rake hell out o' yore hoss with my spurs, an' we'll ride over these Montana shorthorns like the Pecos floodin' in spring!"

IN THAT final terrible minute White saw the grinning face of Cud Way beside Toby Blake. Then Blake brought the noose down as if to place it over his head. The mob stilled in expectation of seeing White jerked from the horse's back to dangle, twisting and turning. Then Blake's shout rang out. He lashed out with one foot, raked the rowels of his spurs along the flank of White's mount. The horse burst away. Cud Way screeched the terrible, blood-curdling cry of the rebels. His guns roared over the heads of the mob. Lightning striking in their midst could not have scattered them faster.

One moment the street was jammed from side to side with a milling mass of men; the next, they were broken, stampeding, every man for himself. Blake's horse reared, pawed at the sky, then struck the running crowd shoulder-on. Men fell, rolled away from the thundering hoofs. Then the three horses were through the mob, running freely in the street beyond.

Uproar crescendoed and crashed in their wake. Shots roared behind them, but far too late. Then the town was gone and they were running in the night, pounding hoofs drumming a song of freedom.

For half an hour White rode without pause, delaying only briefly while Toby leaned close beside him to cut the thongs that bound his wrists. Where the road cut through a thick stand of pine he urged his horse off the road. For a moment they sat still, breathing their horses. While there was tumult far behind them, they could not hear the thudding of pursuing hoofs.

"I reckon they ain't so damn' quick to face armed men in the night," Toby said. He thrust a heavy revolver at White "You'll need this."

Adam shook his head. "There just aren't words to say what I'm feeling, Toby."

Blake grunted. "You've done more'n yore share helpin' us."

Cud grinned. "Shucks, Adam, it'll take more than this to square us with you. We kind o' figgered you was ridin' into trouble so we just natcherly followed along ahind yuh. Damn' lucky thing we did, too!"

"We left Andy at the Pine Tree," Toby put in. "Didn't know which way you might be wantin' to make tracks so that's one way we can run."

White wiped cold sweat from his brow. "Run? I don't think so, Toby. It's too damned easy to run when you're up against it. This time the game's busted wide open for fair. I still don't know who's behind it but I can see what he's after. Up until now he's had an open range, not even any fences to jump. But I'm thinking about the story of Johnny Sundance and the rustlers. Remember that? Fellers were stealing Johnny's lady boss blind, and Johnny got a bellyfull. So he run off every head of cattle on the range, sold the whole herd, and left the rustlers with an empty range."

Toby blinked. "Who's herd yuh fixin' to steal?"

White laughed. The knowledge that for this one time the game was out of hand so far as the hidden chess-player was concerned, sustained him. "Nobody's herd—but, Toby did you ever rob a bank?"

Toby chuckled. "There was a plumb nasty rumor oncet that I was the feller who robbed the Midlands bank. 'Course there wasn't no proof but I reckon I got an idea as to how sich things is handled."

"I'll just bet you have!" White agreed. He sobered. "Toby, Cud, whoever is behind this setup is ready for the payoff. He's counting on three things: the cash in Morgan's bank to settle with Todd Krale; my neck to stretch provin' to Selman that Morgan's the big stink in these woods; and Morgan himself. If they want me now they'll have to come for me and it's my hunch to dump all their eggs in one basket. If we clean out the bank Todd Krale's going to come a-gunning, and if we take Morgan then they'll have to come after the two of us. It's my idea it will smoke the big wolf out of the thicket and I'm counting on hanging his hide to my wall!"

Toby scraped his fingers over his beard. "There used to be a bunch o' fellers known as the Border Legion. They was one hell of a wild bunch, believe me! They'd ride into a town, shoot the hell out of it, clean out all the cash in sight and gallop off laughin'.

Texas style. That what you got in mind?"

"Close enough, Toby. Texas style—that covers it!"

"Ya-hooo-ooo!" Cud Way howled. "Now yo're talkin' chili an' beans, boss!"

"All right, here's the deal," White explained. "We'll wait here until we hear them coming, then we'll double back to town."

The brief three hours of sleep he had gained at the jail stood White in good stead. His mind was clear and his strength was returning. He gained what rest he could during the wait before the sound of pursuit came down the road from Medicine Bend. Then he mounted his horse and led the way back through the stand of pine. For half an hour they rode in silence through the woods before returning to the road. Even then they walked their horses.

When the lights of Morgan's Castle were first visible, White pulled off the road and dismounted. "I'm going alone. Toby," he said. "Morgan'll have his place guarded like a fort. One man can slip in and out easier than three. You and Cud stick right here until you hear enough hell up there to know I'm done for—or I get back. Be ready to ride. We'll be heading for Medicine Bend in a hurry!" His voice carried an assurance he didn't feel.

The moon had risen from the jagged black peaks to the east, and silver light shone down, making gray and black patterns of the night. The white-topped peaks of the mountains loomed close, almost as if balanced, ready to plunge down into the valley. A thin rime of frost clad the grass slopes beneath the trees. His breath made a vapor trail as he walked. Then he stopped short, every muscle stiff with tension.

Not twenty feet in front of him, in a clump of pine and shrub, a match flared. The yellow-red glow burst out, wavered to the sucking intake of a man's breath dragging on a cigarette, then the match was extinguished and only the tiny red tip of the cigarette remained. A guard. His hunch had been right! Through the pines ahead he could see the house ablaze with light.

Keeping the glowing tip of the cigarette before him White moved slowly. The shadowy outlines of a man's face came clear. He heard the whistling intake of breath, then his right fist cannonballed into the face and the guard went down. White dragged him against a sapling, drew his arms behind him and lashed them with the man's belt. He stuffed the guard's kerchief into his mouth and moved on.

XIII

HE AVOIDED another guard, nearly walked into a third, but held back long enough for the man to move past him. Sweat beaded his brow and his breath came in labored gasps. He stood in the last fringe of trees before the stretch of lawns about the house. Yellow light striped the darkness of the lawn from unshuttered windows. A single glance told him there was no cover. For a moment White hesitated, then he grinned and fished out a cigarette.

As he stepped out into the full glare of the moon he lighted a cigarette. At a measured pace he walked boldly toward the house. It was the only move he could make with any hope of success, and even so he expected the thunder of a rifle, the tearing bite of a slug at every step. Suddenly, close against the side of the house, a shadow loomed up—a guard, rifle cradled in his arms.

"Hey, Mike!" came the man's voice. "What the hell you doin' out there? Want to get shot by some ranny with buckfever? I heard they was shootin' at shadows the other side of the ridge."

"Yea?" White muffled his voice, kept coming. "Boss wants me."

"Oh?" The man with the rifle shrugged. "I guess it's okay but yo're shore takin' a chance. Wish I was goin' in. I could shore go for a hot cup o' java."

"Me, too," White mumbled. "Be seein' yuh."

The rifle guard moved back into the shadows of the house. White heard his leisurely step as he walked toward the far corner, turned it. He thanked his lucky stars for the concealing, distorting moonlight, and moved toward the porch. The wide veranda was empty. At each window he paused long enough to scan the room within but none were occupied.

What if Morgan were not there? He damned the thought. A broad French window sent a wide swath of light across the porch and out onto the lawn beyond.

Through the glass he could see a wall of books and a broad desk. The heavy, broad-shouldered figure of Morgan was there, head bent forward over a newspaper spread out on the desk. White drew his gun. He tested the knob of the glass-panelled door. It turned to the steady pressure of his hand. In one sinuous movement he was in the room, his gun levelled.

The night wind swept in with the opening of the door. Morgan's right hand moved. "Don't try it, Morgan!" White warned.

Morgan lifted his head but no emotion was visible on the granite features. "It's you, White," he said. "I thought it would be—someone else."

"Who did you think it would be? Selman or Krale?"

"Maybe," Morgan smiled, slowly. "You got away. I'm surprised."

"I got away all right, no thanks to you!"

"No thanks to me," Morgan agreed, coldly. "I told you where you stood, White. Remus was here to tell me of the trouble you'd found. I told him what I told you: I don't give a damn! You're no worry of mine!"

Suddenly White laughed. "Man, you're unbelievable! I've got you under my gun, and you're not fazed a damn' bit."

"Why should I be?" Morgan frowned. "You've no fight with me. You won't shoot."

"I'm not sure about that," White returned. "You see, all the time I've been in Montana I've been a sitting target for anybody with a grudge who wanted to take it out on me. But that's over; I killed Jed Blaine tonight and it's a pretty safe bet I'll kill one or two more before I'm done. I know where I stand now and I've got a good idea where you fit in. You've been so blind playing high and mighty, Morgan, you can't see the web someone has woven about you. Every rancher in this end of the state hates your guts, and Selman's reached the point where he's going to try for you with a gun. You've been running the game by your own rules so long you've forgotten what a cold deck is, and that's what's been run in on you."

Morgan pulled a cigar from his vest and lighted it. White watched him closely.

"It so happens, Morgan, I don't like that kind of a game. I've been bucking someone else's crooked deal. Now I've got my turn coming. Just so happens I need you."

Morgan puffed smoke into his lungs, shrugged. "Go on."

"You're going for a ride with me, Morgan. Krale told me tonight that he has your bank all staked out. I'm going to beat him to it. You're going to help me. I'm going to clean you out of ready cash. But I won't keep it. You'll get it back."

"Thanks. But what if I don't want to play?"

"I'm on somebody's list of dead men. The way I see it, when I take you and the dough out to the Pine Tree, the big somebody will come running and I'll be ready for him. If I can't play it that way I'm going to clear out of Montana, and I'm going to leave one hell of a big bunch of dead men behind me! Beginning with you."

White thumbed the hammer of his Colt and pulled the trigger; all that kept the gun from firing was the strength of his thumb. The muzzle was directed at Morgan's chest. For a minute Morgan watched White's face. Then his eyes moved, as if fascinated, to the whiteness of the knuckle of White's thumb under the strain of the gun-hammer.

"By thunder! You mean it!" he exclaimed. "You'd kill me and go on to someone else."

White nodded. "I'm getting tired, Morgan. My nerves are raw. Someone might open a door. A gun might go off outside. Anything at all—and you're a dead man."

"All right, you win!" Morgan stood up hastily. "I'll ride with you."

Morgan made no sound, gave no hint in his face that might betray him, but White felt a coldness on his back, realized that the door to the porch had been opened soundlessly. He stiffened, then a light step behind him, and the prodding of a gun thrust into his back.

"Murderer!" The voice was Marjorie Morgan's. It cut at him as the lash of a whip might. "How wrong I was about you!"

WHITE remained still, the gun in his hand pointed rigidly at Morgan. His rasped, hard and clear: "Were you? Then you'll know if you don't drop that gun and move around in front of me, your father is a dead man."

"I'll shoot!" the girl warned.

"Go ahead!" White returned savagely. "Your father dies with me! I mean it. I'm holding the hammer of my gun back with my thumb. It will fire the instant my strength's gone."

The girl was silent, and White sensed the dread in her mind. Morgan's face was pale. "Do what he says, Marjorie!"

"Father!"

"White's a desperate man, Marjorie. He'll do what he says."

The pressure of the gun in his back lessened. The gun fell to the floor. The girl moved to face him. Her eyes were pools of anger. Her mouth was firmly set.

"I'm sorry, Marjorie," Adam White said. "There's no way for me to explain." He frowned. "I can't leave you behind me. Morgan, she'll have to ride with us."

"Man, you're crazy!" Morgan gasped, the iron crumbling away in his agony. "She might be hurt—"

"No." White stood firm. "I promise you that." He motioned with his gun. "You know the best way to go. We'll need horses. You can leave word you're leaving."

Through the silent, brightly lighted house they moved, Morgan in the lead, Marjorie at his side. White sheathed his gun, but kept his right hand close over the butt. At the rear entrance of the hall Morgan paused at the door.

"Billy," he called out. "I'm taking one man and my daughter with me. Saddle three horses. I won't be back until tomorrow. Tell Jim Bell."

A man posted outside the door was a blurred shadow. His footsteps moved away. "He'll bring the horses around. There'll be no trouble." Morgan watched White's face. Marjorie was staring at him as if she had never seen him before.

They waited in the shadows of the porch for Billy's return. Finally the tall shadows of three horses moved up. Billy was with them, and a second man.

"That you, Bell?" Morgan called.

"Yes, boss," the foreman replied. "Billy tells me you're ridin' out."

"That's right. I think it's best. I'm taking Marjorie out of the way." There wasn't a tremor in Morgan's voice.

"I don't get it, boss."

"I didn't ask you, Bell," Morgan said. "You and Billy ride up to the ridge. If that young fool Selman rides in he'll come that way."

The two men moved away and Morgan went to his horse. White offered his hand to the girl but she drew back. "I don't need your help" she flashed.

He kept his hand on his gun as he mounted but Morgan made no untoward move. The three of them rode boldly around the house and down the gravelled walk. They rounded the corner, and for two hundred yards rode in moonlight, black shadows on silver. For half that distance they rode slowly; then a shout peeled out in Bell's gruff voice.

"Lookout! Somebody's broke through! He's takin' the old man!"

Shouts and uproar. "Here's Whitey—tied to a tree" A man sang out. Then White jumped his horse close to his two captives.

"Ride!" he yelled. Even as he spoke a man jumped from the shadows toward them. White's shot over his head broke his stride. He tripped and fell heavily. A rifle went off. Bedlam broke loose. Shouts. Yells. Curses. A shotgun tore the night air.

Morgan spurred his horse, and Marjorie's took the pace. White followed. The girl's horse stumbled. White was near its head. His left hand caught the reins from the girl's fingers and the horse regained its stride. The black shadows of the pine woods loomed up and they plunged into it.

"Straight ahead!" White ordered. They spurred on at a dead run. Behind them came the thunder of hoofs but no shots. Straight toward Medicine Bend they rode, and then White directed Morgan to pull off into a stand of pines, and followed with the girl. Two horsemen met them, Cud Way and Toby Blake.

"Head for town, Toby!" White shouted. "Cud, get back and lead Morgan's men toward the mountains. Don't double back until you've lost them. Ride!"

Cud galloped clear. For five minutes White rode hard before he came up to Morgan and Blake. "Ease up," he said. He pulled in his own horse and that of the girl. They sat still. In the distance, shots pierced the night, and wild yells. But they soon receded.

A half hour passed before the sound of a lone horseman reached them. It was Cud

Way. He was grinning broadly as he rode up. "Lost 'em, boss!" he reported.

"Good job, Cud!" White said. "Toby, let's finish this mess up."

As they rode down the main street of Medicine Bend a few minutes later there wasn't a light to be seen. Even the saloons were shuttered and dark. There was one lonely light from the Taylor House. Straight to the bank they rode and White dismounted.

"Cud, you get the pleasure of the lady's company. Morgan, you go first. Toby you stand by the doors. I'll go in with Morgan. I don't expect trouble from the town but Todd Krale might show up. Watch out."

It was over sooner than White expected. Once committed to the line of action, Morgan moved fast. He opened the safe, found a canvas satchel and filled it. "Still say I get this back, White?"

"Sure, Morgan. If I wanted to make money this way I wouldn't be up to my neck in trouble at the Pine Tree."

"I suppose not," Morgan replied. "You know, if circumstances were different I might admire a man like you."

"Thanks," Adam answered "That's something. I'm counting on it for later. Right now we'll take our loot and mosey. We'll leave the safe open and the front door unlocked. I want to save Krale all the trouble I can. Besides, he'd blow hell out of things getting that safe opened. This way you can pick up right where you left off if things work out."

"If," Morgan agreed. "That's a big word."

"We'll know soon enough." White and Morgan left the bank. Toby Blake grinned as they came out.

"Quiet as a shot-gun wedding," he announced. He saw Morgan and whistled. "Now that's plumb nice o' the man. Is it robbery when the owner does the openin' and totin' hisself?"

"It'll be worse than that, Toby," if we don't get a move on!" White swung up to the saddle. Suddenly the tension, the uncertainty were gone. He grinned at Morgan. "For the first time I've got some blue chips in this game! I'm taking the whole pot out to the Pine Tree, and somebody's going to have to come after it. When he does I'm going to be ready for him! Let's ride!"

XIV

MORGAN and his daughter were locked in rooms in the ranchhouse. And the messages had been sent. To Selman he had despatched Tony Velez. The message was brief: *I've got Morgan at the Pine Tree with me. You're brave in a hanging mob. If you've got the guts, come for me now!"*

And Charley Wong he had sent in to Medicine Bend to find marshal Dan Loper. The message he carried was for Todd Krale: *"Morgan's gold is at the Pine Tree. Come and get it if you can!"*

Toby and Cud had taken turn-about on guard the balance of the night. For Andy Bright, White had another task. The word that Morgan was being held at the Pine Tree would get to Bell, Morgan's foreman. Which brought into play every faction of the feud that he knew. He had no doubt at all that the man behind it all would ride with one or another group. It was just a matter of waiting, now, and testing his own surmise that the man he wanted would not take the open way, but would play one last, deadly trick. . . .

There was a sharp knock at the door and Toby Blake came in. He was grinning. "Howdy, Adam. I was wonderin' if you'd ever wake up. It's gettin' on for noon."

"I must be getting old, Toby. Anything happen yet?"

"Nope. I sent Cud out aways. He's fixed up comfortable with a rifle an' some chow. Cud'll give us word of anybody ridin' in. That's one thing about this Pine Tree spread, pard. Ain't much chance of anybody walkin' in unannounced."

After White struggled into his clothes he poured water from a pitcher into a bowl on the washstand and doused his whole head. The water was icy cold and the sudden chill cleared the last of sleep from his mind. He dried his face and hands and combed his hair with some care. There were dark, ugly marks on his face. Then he buckled on his gunbelt, made an odd sideward tilt with his body, and his gun was in his hand.

"Ahuh!" Blake ejaculated. "Now thet's some trick. Slick an' shore as death. The way you're all purtied up, reckon you're fixin' to attend somebody's funeral."

"Could be, Toby," White admitted rue-

fully. "But we've got company."

"Yep, we shore have!" Toby agreed heartily. "An' some company, if'n I says so myself. Never met up with a gal like that Miss Marjorie afore. Know what she did this mornin'? She seen me out her bedroom window an' calls out: "Yo're Toby Blake,' she says. 'I know you.' Just as pert as yuh please, Adam. Then she says, 'Toby,' she says, 'I'm going to give you my parole. I won't try anything, to get away, or anything. Please unlock my door. I'll fix breakfast.' Waal, I ain't so particular about my own cookin', Adam, an' she 'peared like she was in earnest so I jist let her out. An' from the smell comin' from the kitchen 'tweren't no mistake!"

A few minutes later, as he entered the kitchen, White could back up Blake's judgment. There was a growing stack of buckwheat cakes, and crisp bacon and a platter of eggs. The steamy smell of coffee was strong. Marjorie Morgan stiffened as he came in.

Her face was pale and dark shadows showed under her amber eyes.

"Miss Morgan, I want to talk to you," Adam said. He felt ill at ease.

"I think there's nothing to be said," she replied. "I gave Toby Blake my word I'd not make trouble. I won't."

"Listen!" he demanded. "You told me once I was very much like your father. That's true. Do you think the man who built Morgan's Empire would act any different than I have?"

"You—like him!" she flashed. "El Blanco. Renegade. Outlaw. Cheat!"

He grasped her arm and dragged her to him. Her eyes blazed up into his—then closed as he kissed her, fiercely, again and again. As suddenly he released her.

"There!" he whispered hoarsely. "Now you know. I love you, Marjorie, even if you hate me for it as long as you live."

He strode out of the kitchen and down the hall to Morgan's room. Morgan was sitting on the edge of the bed. He looked up quickly, his face impassive.

"I've been thinking, White," he said, as though continuing a conversation begun earlier. "I think I'm wrong about you. You won't understand what it takes to admit that. Maybe it's easy for you to say you're wrong, but it's not easy for me."

White waited. This was a new Morgan, something steel-hard in his face. "A man gets tired of fighting, White, and that's when he overlooks things. That's when he sits tight and waits for the bottom to drop out from under him. You haven't reached that point yet. I wonder if you ever will. I didn't think I ever would. But I know better now. This trouble began long before you left the border. I'm beginning to suspect it began a long, long time ago. But it didn't seem to point to me so I disregarded it. I knew of Krale and what he was doing but he left me alone and I tolerated him. I knew of Tommy Selman's striking back like a fool but I wasn't afraid of him or what he could do. Now I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything. But I liked Cyrus Selman, White. We fought for thirty years and I respected him. I've known all along what I wouldn't admit before—Cyrus Selman didn't kill himself. He was a victim of what you're fighting now." Morgan stopped. "About all that's left to say is, I'm standing beside you at the showdown whether you keep me here or not."

"I don't trust you, Morgan," White answered thoughtfully, stirred despite himself. "Not far enough to give you a gun. There is still a chance, a crazy chance, that you're behind all this. If you are—" he broke off.

Morgan stood up. "That's straight talk. Thanks. One thing more. I told you once I'd stand between you and Marjorie. I meant it then. Now I realize I can't run Marjorie's life any more than I can run yours. You're on your own."

White smiled. "My turn to say thanks, I guess. But I can tell you that you don't have to worry about Marjorie and me. She hates my guts. I don't blame her. You said you'd found out a few things. I have, too. For one, I've learned a man can't change his life by changing his habits and clothes. When this is over you can buy back the Pine Tree at your own price."

Morgan said nothing as he followed White back to the kitchen. They ate breakfast in silence, White hardly tasting his food. Marjorie sat across from him, her face strained. Only Toby ate with a hearty will, and even he cast many glances at White's bruise-darkened face. And when he finished eating, he sighed heavily.

"Ma'am, that's one fine meal. I never expected to eat pancakes like that this side o'

heaven. They was plain wonderful—"

He broke off abruptly, and they all tensed in their chairs. From the road leading up to the ranchhouse came the drumming thud of hoofs.

"Here we go!" Toby exploded. "They got past Cud!"

HE MADE a dive for his rifle but White was already moving toward the porch. He gained it in swift strides, paced around it to face the road. His hand was close above the butt of his gun, only to fall away as he straightened with surprise. Two riders were bearing past the bunkhouse, their horses lathered and flecked with foam and dust. They drew up at the porch even as he sprang down to meet them.

"Molly!" he exclaimed, reaching up to help her down. Doc Remus sat beside her, his thin face breaking into a wan smile.

"Howdy, Adam!" he called out. "Heard the good news about you getting free. I'm glad, boy!" Then his smile faded. "But there's plumb hell to pay! You sure cut a wide swath when you get started. That's why Miss Drake here dragged this tough old carcass of mine over the roughest ride I've made in twenty years!"

Molly Dunne—Madelon Drake—smiled at him as he helped her down. "There isn't much time, Adam!" she whispered. "The whole county's heard what you've done—taking Joe Morgan, robbing the bank, beating Tommy at his own game. But I'm afraid your luck's run out!"

"Here, now take it easy!" White admonished. "Sure, I've done those things, but I haven't made a good start yet. You shouldn't have come, Molly—"

"I had to come, Adam!" the girl burst out. "You don't know. You don't understand. Tommy's thrown in with Todd Krale's outfit. They're riding for the Pine Tree together!"

"What's that?" White stood rooted to the ground. "Say that again, Molly!"

"She got it straight," Doc Remus confirmed. He mopped at his face. "The whole world's gone mad! Selman's a crazy man. He shot and killed Dan Loper last night after you got away. Accused Loper of letting you make the break. Loper, the damned fool, tried to pull a gun. He never had a chance. Hanson's shot went in first, and Selman's a split-second later!"

"Hanson!" White's mouth thinned.

"Sure! What did you expect? Once he went over to Selman he's been riding him hard. Selman tried to stir up enough men in town to ride with him this morning but the town had had enough. They took to their holes like scared rabbits. Me included! Selman was at the Taylor House, and Miss Drake here heard the whole thing when Krale rode up, big as life and twice as nasty! It was short and sweet. Krale's throwing in with Selman for this one ride. They'll burn you out, then Krale blows the state. And you've got Morgan here waiting for them!" He shook his head. "Miss Drake came for me and we hit straight for the Pine Tree, but it's my guess Selman and the rest aren't an hour behind us. Adam, I don't know what's on your mind but I'm telling you you've bit off one hell of a lot more than you can swaller! Clear out, is my advice. I'll stick here and try my hand at talking sense into Selman's thick head."

"Not a chance!" White tensed. "This is it, Doc. Win or lose, it ends here!" White frowned. He met the keen, sure gaze of Molly Dunne. There was a question in her eyes. Finally he shook his head. "I don't know, Molly. This isn't what I figured would happen. I can't really believe that Selman is behind all this. And yet it makes sense."

The girl paled, staggered, but caught herself in time. He reached for her, to steady her, but she waved his arm away. "I'm all right, Adam. Just tired."

"Of course you are. Go on into the house. Marjorie Morgan's there, and you'll stay with her." She turned to go. He stopped her. "Molly, I hope it doesn't work out wrong for your sake!"

"It won't, Adam!" she said. "We've gone through too much, sacrificed too much to fail now."

Morgan and Toby Blake were waiting on the porch.

"Howdy, Joe!" Remus greeted Morgan. "Looks like White's dead set on his way."

"Hello, Doc," Morgan replied. "I don't know what brings you here but you're a fool to stay. The Pine Tree's going to catch hell right shortly!"

"Listen, boss!" Toby ejaculated. A distant thud of a rifle sounded. "That's Cud Way.

There's company ridin' in!"

"All right, Toby. You know what to do. Get your rifle and get down to the bunkhouse. They'll have to ride past you. You and Cud will be behind them. I don't know what to tell you to expect but watch out!"

"Gotcha, Adam!" Toby sang out. He went inside and came out with a rifle. At a trot he moved out of sight toward the bunkhouse.

"I guess this is it, Morgan," Adam said. "Doc, this isn't your fight. I'll ask you to go inside with the girls. Stay with them." White turned to face down the road. He felt Morgan move up to stand beside him.

Then Doc Remus spoke softly: "I'm sorry, Adam," he said. The words meant nothing, but the tone of them spun White around. Remus was smiling, and looking absurd with his side-whiskers and his balding head, and the heavy Colt revolver clenched in his right hand. The muzzle was in line with White's stomach.

"What's the matter with you, Doc?" White demanded. "This is no time for tricks."

"I'll say it again, Adam: I'm sorry." Remus' face was gentle, smiling, but there was no tremor in his gunhand, and his eyes behind his thicklensed glasses were chips of blue ice. "You see, Adam, I'm going to have to kill you. I tried to get out of it, tried to scare you off. When that failed I tried to let someone else do my work for me. It was Jed Blaine who took that shot at you and missed. I didn't want it that way for I liked you. But it had to be done, and I failed at first. Maybe I didn't pick my tools with care. And maybe ordinary tools won't cut the kind of steel you're made of. But it's over now. Joe, don't move!"

Morgan's face was twisted, shocked. "Doc, for the love of God, have you gone loco?"

Doc Remus moved. It was like the strike of a coiled snake, the biting lunge of a diamond back, and his gun raked across Morgan's cheek. Blood welled into the cut and Morgan went careening against the porch railing.

"Don't say a word, Morgan," Remus thundered. "You're a dead man. I'm going to lay you dead in the dirt of the Pine Tree. I'm going to stand over you and spit in your bloody face!" Passion worked in Remus, but his eyes kept White in line and his gunhand didn't move. White couldn't keep his eyes from the madness in Remus' face. The little doctor continued to smile, a terrible, deadly evil smile.

"I'm the one, Adam," he went on, slowly. "You've sensed me in the shadows. You've rooted and pried and thought, but it was left to me to choose the time to stand before you. But I want you to know I have no quarrel with you. You just happened to be one of the pawns in the game I've built against Morgan. It's a big thing I've done, Adam! I've built it high and now I'm going to kick it down in pieces, and those pieces are going to crush Joe Morgan." His voice rose in pitch, wildly. "I hate your guts, Morgan. You were always big and I was always small. Because I've kept seeing myself as the thing you were, and only you kept me from it. I've fed on your strength, gloried in it, because I knew I was bending it to my own ends. You've built an empire, Morgan, but you've built it for me! You see now? You see?"

Morgan stood against the railing, his great body sagging, his legs weak, but his jaw was set, and his eyes were clear. "I see, Doc," he said. "Of course I see. A man blinds himself to hate, kids himself that it couldn't exist in the heart of his best friend. But I see now. I see Plummer hanging at the end of a rope. And I see the man who betrayed him, standing there laughing. I see you and your black heart. Abel Remus."

Remus swayed, glorying in this triumphant moment. "And you, White. I'm almost sorry for you. But you see, the Pine Tree had to remain under Hanson's control, no matter the cost. Bennett was easy. We frightened him away. Veerman and Franklin were stubborn, like you—and like you, they had to die. But you were smarter. You got the idea and tried to make it pay off. But it can pay off for me, too. You've got all the things I wanted right here. Morgan's standing in front of my gun, and everything he owns is mine just for the reaching! Nobody could stop Morgan; he was too strong. And because of that there'll be no one to carry on the fight when I take over. And I'll do better than you did, Morgan. Far better. And I'll have Marjorie to share it with me. Poor little Marjorie, with her

father dead and the man she loves lying dead beside him—she'll need sympathy and love, Joe. And I'll give it to her. It will take time and care and a lot of effort to make her think the way I want her to, but she'll come around. She'll be mine, too, Joe. Stand still, Adam! I don't want to kill you yet. Not yet!"

"You fool!" White shot out. "Selman will ride in here in a few minutes. You won't have a chance!"

"Won't I, Adam?" Once more the crazy laughter peeled out, and Doctor Abel Remus' once kindly face turned into something not quite human. "Oh, I know your little plan, Adam. You've got one man riding in behind Selman. Another posted in the bunkhouse. And it's my guess that Mexican and Chinaman are riding in over the mountains. You'll stand up to Selman, knowing you've trapped him. And that's good. It's the way I would have done it. Limit the scope of operations, narrow it down to one final scene, and hold command. But you made one mistake, Adam. You lost control of the situation. I hold it now."

Remus chuckled. "How close you were to the truth, Adam! When you brought Veerman in you had the key to the whole thing in your hands. You said that Veerman was the first man you'd ever seen die with no wound on him. I killed him, White. Simply and easily. He was nicked in the shoulder in his quarrel with Hanson. He sent for me. I gave him something to make him sleep. He never woke up. As simple as that and you missed it!"

He shook his head with crazed merriment. "That's the trouble with most schemers, they miss a bet and the whole thing comes apart at the seams. But not me, Adam! Like now. I'm going to stand here with you until Selman comes in close. Hanson and Krale have their orders. When I shoot you down, they'll open up on Selman and his crew. Your two men will try to help but we know where they are. It won't last long. You'll never see the end of it. You first, Adam. Then Morgan. And the game's over."

His smile was terrifying. The knuckles of his right hand whitened on the butt of his Colt. It was at that moment that Adam White laughed. It came from deep inside him, and the grim humor of it was real. Remus stared at him.

"I'm sorry for you, too, Doc!" White said. "Damned sorry."

"That's a poor trick to try against me, Adam," Remus barked.

"It's no trick, Doc," Adam White came back. "You're figuring was right, only you didn't have all the facts to go on. I thought you'd accept only what you saw and no more. I've got three men, Doc, not two. My pard, Andy Bright, is standing in the window behind you with a shotgun in his hand. Andy, stick the muzzle of that gun through the window. Let the Doc hear you."

XV

"SHORE thing, Adam," Andy Bright's cheerful voice rang out. Glass tinkled and with the sound, White moved. His hand swept down, took Remus' gun. The doctor stood still, his face was pallid. His hand trembled. He laughed bitterly.

"In every game there's a joker," he said. "It's good for the pot. I didn't think you had a card left to play Adam. Certainly not a joker."

White moved to Morgan who was staring at the small man as if he had never seen him before. "Here's that gun I talked about," Adam said. "Hanson and Krale won't know what move to make and that might give us time to talk sense into Selman's head."

Hoofs sounded, suddenly, urgently. A band of horsemen swung up the rise, riding fast. White saw Selman's towering figure, then Hanson and Krale.

"That's close enough!" White yelled. He saw Hanson and Krale dart quick glances at Remus. Then his attention riveted to Selman. "You, Tom Selman. I'm talking only to you! If you've got any sense left in your thick head you'll listen!"

The sullen, hollow-eyed face of the young man turned to him, and his mouth drew down in a snarl. "I'm going to finish the job I started in Medicine Bend and I'll give you a partner to dance at the end of a rope—Morgan!"

A shout rang out from the hard-eyed riders behind him. White bent forward, bow-taut. "Look at the faces of Krale and Hanson, Selman!" he yelled. "They see the payoff you're too damned blind to see. Look

at them! Know what's the matter, Selman? It's because we've got Remus here with a shotgun in his belly! Remus—the man who killed your father!"

Krale's frantic glance tore from White to Remus. "My God, boss!" he cried out.

"Shut up, you crazy fool!" Hanson roared, and leaned out from his saddle to strike Krale across the face. The outlaw leader reeled in his saddle and almost fell. Doubt moved into Selman's hate-haunted eyes. He looked from Krale to Hanson to Remus. "What the hell goes here?" he thundered.

Then Krale came erect in the saddle, one side of his face red from Hanson's blow. "You dirty son of a dog!" he screamed, and struck blindly at Hanson. But the ex-foreman of the Pine Tree backed his horse, his hand going to his gun.

"Stop it, you idiotic fools!" Remus screeched, but his words were lost in the sudden turmoil. With bewildering speed Hanson's hand streaked for his gun. It had cleared leather before White's gun thundered. The shot caught Hanson in the shoulder, tore him about. His shot ripped into Krale's horse. The animal screamed with pain, reared, and all hell broke loose.

"Get Krale's men!" Selman shouted, and flung himself at the outlaw. Guns blazed and roared. The shotgun exploded from the window, and a hail of death swept across the porch harmlessly as Remus made his move. Like a dancer he twisted about. His face was broken from the pattern of kindly calm, forced into an evil caricature. His claw-like hands jerked inside his coat.

"You damned meddling fool!" he cried. He levelled the derringer at White's body and at that same instant Morgan shot twice. The bullets broke Remus' movement, spun him against the porch railing. He teetered. Then Morgan's third shot ripped home. The railing broke with a crash and Remus tumbled into the dirt.

White saw Krale go down beneath Selman's angry charge. Two of his men broke for it, only to fall in the thundering crescendo of shots from the rifles of Cud and Toby. Dust and gunsmoke filled the air. A man screamed. It was Todd Krale, with a stomach wound, bent over, both hands dripping red where they gripped his belly. Then only Hanson moved in that scene of red carnage. The man-killer's horse was out of control. White fired. Hanson threw up both arms and fell, only to stop short, head in the dirt as his right foot caught in the stirrup. The maddened horse was running, but a fence was in the way. The terrible thump of Hanson's body striking the weather-hardened wood of the fence was audible as the stroke of a bass drum. The stirrup leather broke, the horse stumbled, then was up, running. Hanson was smashed into the fence, hanging inertly there, head down, blood forming a pool beneath his shattered face.

Five men lay dead before the ranchhouse. Two more sprawled still in the road where Toby Blake's fire had caught them. Two of Selman's riders were down, wounded, and Selman himself had a streak of blood across his brow. White saw Morgan standing, gun in hand, staring down at the still form of Doctor Abel Remus.

Toby Blake came up at a run. He paused to take in that awful scene, then spat heavily to one side. "Reckon that about does it, pard!"

"Not yet, Toby," White said, stiffly. He turned to face Selman. The younger man's face was ghastly. "Selman, you've played the fool, the dumbest damned fool I've ever seen. I told you I was going to beat some sense into your head and now the time has come!"

Selman saw White's blow coming and tried to throw up his arm but White's fist burst through the awkward guard and smashed him to his knees. A trickle of blood welled from his bruised mouth. "I deserved that, White. Go ahead."

"Get one thing straight!" White's voice shook with passion. "I'll never like you if I live to be a hundred. But there's someone that does, and by gum you're going to crawl to her if I have to break your back with my own hands to make you do it!"

Selman's face lifted. His eyes were wide. "What are you saying? Hanson said—"

"To hell with Hanson and what he said!" White thundered. "Make up your own damned mind! You've been willfully blind so long you expect someone to lead you by the hand. Wake up, damn your soul! Madelon Drake loves you. She's the finest thing that ever happened to a no-good idiot like you, and you kicked her in the face. There was never anything between Madelon

and me but friendship. She's good and decent, I want that known!"

"Molly Dunne, a border strumpet—" Selman's face twisted bitterly.

White's hand moved back then forward. The blow stretched Selman over on his back. White jumped astride him, brought him up by gripping his shirt front, then smashed his fist into his face again.

"Adam, stop it! Stop it, damn you! You'll kill him!" The girl's voice came suddenly, and Molly beat at his face with her hands. He stepped back, and she collapsed beside Selman, kissing his battered face. Selman's eyes opened. His hand went out, trembling, to touch her face.

"Madelon!" he whispered. "I didn't want to believe—I fought against it—you'll never forgive me—my damned, crazy pride—"

She closed his bitter lips with her mouth,

THREE weeks. It seemed incredible that time could move so fast, Adam White thought. He lifted his head to sweep the mountains with his eyes. The old thrill was never absent.

He rolled a cigarette and lighted it, inhaling the smoke deeply into his lungs. For the hundredth time he wondered what kept him here at the Pine Tree, and yet knew the answer without even thinking. He touched his shirt pocket, pulled out a well-worn piece of paper. It was from Marjorie Morgan. The words had seared themselves into his brain:

Adam:

I must see you. Molly told me how she met you. Need I tell you now how I feel? Please come.

Marjorie.

He folded the letter and replaced it in his pocket. He hadn't gone to her. It was too late for him, had always been too late. Morgan had been right about that. Even to stay at the Pine Tree, that close to her, without seeing her, was torture, but he forced it upon himself. Cud Way was foreman of the Pine Tree, and Andy Bright had turned out to be a top hand with cattle. The Pine Tree was a successful ranch. For Toby Blake, Fate had reserved one last trick. Morgan had offered him Loper's job as Marshal of Medicine Bend and Toby had accepted.

White's eyes followed a swale-back across the valley, up, up to the blue immensity of heaven itself. He smiled ruefully. Tommy Selman and Molly Dunne were happily married.

He felt a rich fullness in his heart, marred only by the sudden, alarming knowledge that he could stay no longer. He must leave Montana and never come back.

The decision was a hard one but he would act on it tonight. He'd give it no time to weaken and be lost. He urged his horse on following the crest southward, then descended the rough decline that fell in staggered steps to the benchland where the ranchhouse pressed against the stand of pines. Down in the valley, in the distance, he saw the dust of a wagon's passage. That would be Cud Way with the supplies from town. He could tell Cud Way tonight, and ride on to Medicine Bend. The stage to Virgil would pick him up in the morning.

The long shadows of sunset staggered out before him as he rode through the last tangle of thicket before the ranchhouse. Cud was driving past the bunkhouse. His cheery shout rang out. Then White reined in, stung erect, his body tense, his pulse hammering in his throat. For beside Cud on the spring seat of the wagon sat Marjorie Morgan. For a moment White was still, then he rode his horse alongside as Cud pulled the team in.

White had eyes only for Marjorie. The aching, terrible doubts in his mind were poignantly sharp. She was smiling.

"You wouldn't come to me so I came to you, Adam," she said softly. "Did you think Morgan's daughter would let you get away from her?"

Her arms were stretched out toward him. He held back, his face strained, white. "Marjorie—" Words failed him.

"Don't talk, Adam," she whispered. Can't you see I'm waiting for you to kiss me?"

Then, suddenly, she was in his arms. The horse backed away, and White swung her up. Her arms went about his neck, his lips touched hers, and he crushed her to him. In the blue distance the setting sun limned the towering mountains with gold. In one way, at least, Montana had licked Adam White.

BRANDED!

By BART CASSIDY

Farrow's death lit up Tuscon's gun-war, flamed a hillkitty to bobcat-pitch. For when Gerder's gang roughed Drake's fur, the claws he flashed were death-quick . . . and the spark in the eye was powder-born.

THE firelight caught the strange puckered scar-pattern high on one side of his face as Laramie Drake paced restlessly back and forth in front of the fireplace. He had taken off his coat, but the strap harnessing his Knuckle Duster beneath one armpit still gleamed across the white shirt drawn taut over the heft of his shoulder. There was something sardonic about the twist of his thin, mobile lips, and his black eyes roved the room almost angrily.

"Listen." Etienne Villeneu, sitting gross and cheerful in the big Spanish armchair

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they had brought from the Coronado House, had begun whetting his pair of carving knives again. "Listen, Drake, you didn't think you could throw off the old life with one shrug of your shoulders, did you? You want to retire at thirty-five? *Voilà!* Retire. But you've been a gambler most of your life, and you got to give yourself time to get accustomed to this. Now let me tell you about the *Filets de Levraut à la Mornay* I am planning for supper. You trim off the filets of two leverets, compre, two young hares,—"

"All right, all right—" Laramie Drake waved a long-fingered hand, supple, and pale from so many years with the cards—"so we're having Filets of Rabbit Mornay. That's fine. I know exactly how you prepare it. After ten years with you, I could write a recipe book!"

"Hare, not rabbit. You never let me finish telling you how to cook Filets de Levraut, Drake," pouted Etienne. He weighed near two hundred and fifty pounds and stood many inches shorter than Drake's five-ten, and his white apron rose in a series of jolly bulges from fat thighs to triple chins, a waxed mustache looking as if it held up the red bulb of his nose. He must have realized how Drake had stopped pacing, for he looked up from his carving knives. "Eh?"

Drake ran one hand through his thick black hair, heavy brows drawing down over his eyes as he tried to hear it again. "Sounded like someone riding their horse pretty hard."

Etienne spat upon the whetstone. "You are just jumpy. Who would be coming this far into the Tanque Verdes at night? When you picked a spot for your chateau, you really wanted to get away from Tucson."

"No, listen." Drake's shoes made a soft thud across the red and black Navajo rug to the heavy oak door, and he swung it open. Then the tattoo of a running horse came clearly, and Etienne hoisted himself out of the armchair, his white chef's hat bobbing down to one side of his plump cheeks as he waddled over behind Laramie Drake.

"Sacre nom du nom," he said. "It's a girl, Drake."

Drake couldn't hear any more because he had jumped across the porch and was out from under the portals, reaching the girl as she threw herself from the lathered dun. She was crying and panting and would have fallen without his support. For just that moment her red hair swept soft and silken across his face, and then he had recognized her.

"Midge?" he said, "what the he— what are you doing here?"

She was not a large girl within the square line of her denim ducking suit, and the yellow stream of light flashed in her blue eyes as they turned up to him in a flushed, tear-stained face. "I was coming home from Tucson. Gerder stopped me where the Tanque Verde Road crosses the Old Spanish Trail; it was something about Father's papers. Gerder threatened me, even tried to get his hands on me. He cut me off from taking the trail when I got free. This was the only way left. Please, Drake, you've got to help me. Hide me or something. I don't know, I don't know—"

THE softness of her trembling against Drake filled him with a helplessness he had never known with a woman, before. "What would Gerder want with your father's papers? Why should he think you had them, anyway? Eben Hazard's been your guardian and administrator of the estate since your dad was shot in Tucson last May, hasn't he?"

"Yes, yes!" Midge buried her face against his chest, drawing a labored breath as she tried to stop sobbing. "Hazard has all Dad's papers. I told you I don't know what it's about. Everything's in such a mess since Face Card's death, anyway. Gerder thinks he runs Tucson now—"

"Face Card!" Drake grabbed her by the shoulders, shoving her back to stare at her face.

"Yes," she said desperately. "Your ex-partner in the Coronado House. Face Card Farrow. Murdered in his office last Tuesday. I guess you know what a state that leaves Tucson in. With Face Card out, his whole machine is falling apart. The Gerder faction has stepped on the big horse, and anybody who was riding Face Card Farrow's wagon had better leave this pasture—" she broke off, clutching him again—"Drake, please, Drake—"

The pine-crested slopes of the Tanque Verdes rose somberly against the night sky

all about them with the wagon road forming a white ribbon eastward from the house and finally disappearing beneath the cottonwoods banding the dry bottoms of No Agua. It was up this road that the sound of more horses came to Drake, barely audible through the girl's hoarse breathing.

"Get that dun out of sight," he snapped at Etienne Villeneu, and grabbed the girl's elbow to shove her ahead of him into the house. For a moment her figure was silhouetted before him in the door, light catching across the maturing curve of one hip and limning the tight line of her levis down her slim thigh. Then he had the door shut behind them and was moving swiftly around her to an inner portal leading to Etienne's bedroom. Perhaps she hadn't expected to turn around quite so soon, because in that first instant, he caught an odd calculation in her eyes. Then the fear crossed her face again, and he saw the full tremble of her lower lip above the soft curve of her chin.

"Stay in there no matter what happens," he told her, and closed the door softly after she was through, frowning. He had the gambler's instinctive suspicion of everyone, anyway, and the gambler's habitual revolt at mixing in any business not strictly his own. Damn fool, he told himself, and then was whirling to face the hard thunder of horses drawn to a hock-scraping halt outside, and someone's drumming boots across the flagstone. The door shuddered.

"Open it," said Drake, "or did you just come to knock it down?"

Barton Gerder shoved open the heavy portal and moved into the room in a mincing, suspicious, saddle-bound walk. He had a dirty white flat-topped hat shoved back on his big head, and his dank hair hung down over his forehead wet with sweat, small quick eyes shifting about the room in a habitual, experienced way before they settled on Drake's broad-shouldered figure, standing wide-legged before the fireplace.

"Surprised you didn't have that door locked," said Gerder.

"You might shut it before the wind blows this fire out," Drake told him. "Why should I lock my doors?"

Gerder's holster sagged low enough for the leather to creak softly against his dusty batwing chaps as he moved on in, wiping the dirty stubble on his strong chin as he studied Drake's sardonic face.

"Hello, Berry," said Drake.

Jack Berry, shutting the door as he came in behind Gerder, nodded to Drake, his face set in that expressionless mask Drake had become so used to in Berry's nightly visits to the faro layout at the Coronado House these last five years. He was a small, slim man, neat without being foppish in his short-skirted town coat and gray trousers tucked into plain-topped boots, a subtle potency to his eternal silence.

"You know why you should lock your doors, Drake," said Gerder.

"The tone of your voice would indicate this visit wasn't for friendship's sake alone," said Drake, smiling ironically.

The sarcasm brought Gerder's heavy shoulder forward, causing his soiled denim ducking jacket to fall away from the dusty front of his white shirt. "Let's not spar. I knew where the girl was headed when she turned off the Tanque Verde Road, and if you're trying to keep me from getting her, you should have locked your door."

"Girl?"

"You never were a good gambler, Drake," said Gerder, taking another mincing step forward. "You couldn't hide anything in your face. That girl ran away from her guardian, and Eben Hazard sent me to bring her back. You're bucking the law by harboring her. Fork her over and we'll forget it."

"I'm glad you put your cards on the table right away, because I can drop any misguided hospitality I might have considered and tell you to keep your whole hand right there on the edge of the table," said Drake, and the tone in his voice stopped Jack Berry abruptly from moving any further down the room parallel to the front wall. "You're bucking the law, too, Gerder. This is armed trespass, and whatever I did about it would be justified."

The flush showed through Gerder's shadowy stubble, creeping up his thick neck and into his cheeks, but he held a restraint yet. "Drake, Face Card Farrow is dead."

DRAKE didn't attempt any surprise, and he saw the satisfaction in Gerder's eyes, and Berry took another step down the wall that pulled Drake up and turned him

slightly toward the smaller man, and Berry stopped again.

"You should at least try and register a little astonishment," said Gerder mockingly, and then his voice hardened. "I told you you weren't a good gambler. The girl's here, and she told you about Face Card, didn't she?"

"Did she? Berry!"

Berry stopped again, past the couch now, and Gerder's weight settled forward a little farther. "You know what Farrow's death means, Drake, better than I. As long as he held all the reins in Tucson, you could do just about as you pleased, as his partner."

"I never touched Farrow's politics. My business was the Coronado House."

"As long as Farrow sat the saddle on Convent Street, you were all right. But he's out of the saddle now, Drake; he's let the whole bunch of reins go, and the horses are running wild. You don't hold so much as the toe of your boot in Tucson's poke now. Sheriff Kennedy is just one example. Farrow's man? Everybody knew it. Just a matter of time now before Kennedy vacates his office, voluntarily or involuntarily. He's afraid to make a move in any direction. The law's through backing any play you make. You aren't safe even out here in your prairie-dog hole. Farrow made as many enemies as friends, and you were his partner, Drake, and they aren't going to discriminate."

"Move your cards closer."

"You can see my cards, you know what I'm driving at." Gerder lowered his head a little, staring at Drake from beneath his dark brow. "You're blocked on every side, Drake, you're not in a position to buck anybody. And that goes for me. You're in a deeper hole than the sheriff, being Farrow's partner; anyway you jump is into the fire."

"I *was* Farrow's partner," said Drake. "The petition to dissolve our association has been in the court's hands for a week."

"That won't make any difference," said Gerder. "You know it. I'm only trying to show you why you'd better hand over Midge Lawrence without ruckus, Drake. You aren't in any position to make me take her by force. You have no recourse, no matter what I do here."

"Haven't I?" said Drake.

"You know what I meant."

"And you know what I mean."

Gerder's quick eyes dropped from Drake's lean face to the strap across his shoulder holding the Knuckle Duster underneath his armpit; it wasn't a very heavy strap, hardly noticeable to a man who didn't know what it meant, for the Reid wasn't a large gun, being only three inches overall and meant for a pocket hideout, where most men carried it, but Drake preferred the armpit so he could pack it when his coat was off, and Gerder knew what it meant, and what Drake meant.

"Drake," said Gerder, and took a heavy breath, "you're in a big enough tight already without going about things this here way."

"Berry," snapped Drake, "I warn you—"

But Jack Berry kept on moving toward the big desk in the corner of the room, and Drake understood how his target was already too separated, and how Gerder's whole body was settling on down that way, and his voice suddenly cut savagely at them.

"All right, go ahead, damn you, go ahead—"

"Drake, I think I won't have that Filets of Hare after all. I think *Timbale de Foie Gras Montesque* is—"

"Berry!" shouted Gerder, and went for his gun.

IT HAD all come at once like that, but Drake had already picked his man, knowing he had to take one or the other with them that far apart, and he was facing toward Jack Berry because he had pegged him as the fastest. But the hollow thump came hard on Gerder's shout, and Drake saw Berry stiffen, thrown back against the wall by the motion of his own body, and a big carving knife quivered in the adobe not an inch from Berry's right ear, and he stood rigid there without trying to get his gun out any further. Almost before he had turned toward Berry, Drake was whirling back to Gerder, and maybe it was this that stopped Gerder, or maybe Gerder had stopped already. The big sweating man was bent forward in his crouch, and his gun was not any farther from its holster than Berry's.

"Go ahead," said Drake. "I want you

to, Gerder. Go on."

Gerder's eyes were on Drake's hand where it was held stiffly out in front of the gambler's white shirt front, thumb cocked up and taut fingers pointing outward. Gerder remained in his crouch a moment longer, then his hoarse inhalation seemed to draw him up in a series of spasmodic jerks, his grimy hand lifting carefully off the black rubber grip of his Colt.

Berry had relaxed somewhat, but was still against the wall that way, and Drake saw what had held him from further movement. Etienne Villeneu stood in the kitchen door, holding his other carving knife by its tip. His twinkling eyes shifted slyly in their fat pouches from Berry to Gerder to Drake, and then he chuckled, and tossed the knife into the air a little so he could catch it by the hilt and spat upon the whetstone in his other hand.

"As I was saying," he grinned, beginning to hone the blade, "I think *Timbale de Foie Gras Montesque* would be better for a Tuesday night. I think Hungarian sauce would be indicated here, too." He looked up, raising his eyebrows. "What do you think, M'sieu Gerder?"

Gerder did not answer, standing there staring at Drake, his jaw shoved out and his lower lip working at his upper in a habitual, frustrated way. Drake had held that hand cocked out in front of him until now, and he lowered it with an ironic smile.

"Would it be impolite of me to ask that you leave now?"

Gerder inclined his head toward Berry, and the smaller man moved away from the wall so he would have room to pass the long knife sticking out of the adobe and then slid down the wall to the door, opening it still facing toward Drake. Gerder started to back out after Berry, then stopped again.

"You've just built yourself a wooden suit, Drake," he said between set teeth. "It isn't only the girl. Part of it's her, but that's just the start. It isn't only the setup in Tucson, either. That's another part, too, but that don't begin to cover it. I'll tell you what does cover it, Drake. The suit I mentioned. The kind you wear when they put you in that six foot hole in the ground. You've built it all yourself, Drake, and all you have to do now is put it on."

II

IT WAS June and the slopes of the Tanque Verdes were lush with Texas crab and blue gramma grass, and higher up the Ponderosa pine mingled its darksome beauty with the lighter ash that marched down off the crests, and every morning before dawn, Laramie Drake had arisen like this and gone out in a heavy mackinaw to stand in the meadow before his new house and watch the sun come up over the eastward ridges. It was new to him, getting up that early, and it was new to him, calling such land his own, and it was good to him somehow. It was only at night that he felt a restless longing for the old life, but when the sun cast its first pink light over the spread of his meadows this way, he forgot the lure of smoky saloons and green-topped tables and stacked chips and women with their dresses cut low across white bosoms to attract a man's eye and the endless call of keno dealers and roulette croupiers. For the moment, standing here on the porch, he had forgotten Gerder, and the night before, but as the door opened, he turned nervously and realized it had been at the back of his mind all the time.

"What do you want for breakfast," Etienne said. *"Melon Cantaloupe Glacé? Oeufs sur-le-Plat?"*

"Eggs on a dish, eggs anyway—" Drake moved his dark head impatiently— "Villey, what are we going to do with that girl?"

"Midge?" Etienne's eyebrows rose. "Why do anything with her? She seems to like it here. You need a woman around."

"Don't be absurd. I'll just get into trouble keeping her here. When I mentioned taking her back to Hazard last night she went all to pieces. What have they been doing to her, Villey? A girl should trust her guardian, at least." He became aware that Midge had come up behind Villeneu and felt a faint flush creep into his face, as if he had been caught at something to be ashamed of, and then knew an anger at himself for that. "Why is it, Midge? What's wrong with Hazard?"

Etienne moved away from the door, and she stood with one hand on the frame, not meeting his eyes. "I don't know, Drake. I'm afraid of him. He has such a temper. He's always prying at me, implying I'm hiding

some of Dad's things or something. I have a big fight with him every time I even want to leave the house. It's like a prison."

He sensed there was more to it than that. "You never did get along with Eben, did you? I remember last May you were worrying Judge Petrie about getting another administrator."

"I guess I've caused the judge a lot of trouble," she said. "Caused everybody a lot—"

"Don't take that attitude," he said. "You know we all want to help you in any way we can. Can't you tell me a little more of what it was about last night? Gerder said he had come from Hazard to get you. That doesn't jibe with your story."

Her lustrous red hair bobbed at her neck with the sharp upward tilt of her head. "You don't believe—"

"I believe you."

"Then maybe Gerder *was* working with Hazard," she said. "How do we know where anybody stands, with this upset in Tucson. Hazard was mixed up in Farrow's politics just as much as anybody. Hazard's chairman of the Tucson Cattlemen's Association, and half the men in the T. C. A. were under Farrow's thumb, one way or another. Gerder wouldn't tell me straight out what he wanted last night. He seemed to think I knew well enough. He said it affected everybody in the Tanque Verdes, everybody in Tucson, for that matter. Please, Drake, don't make me go back to Hazard."

"I can't keep you here, Midge. You'd better get ready."

She turned from the door abruptly, and he saw her shoulders trembling as she moved back toward the room she had slept in. He turned toward Etienne, holding out a helpless hand.

"What can I do, Villey? I've got to take her back. I wouldn't know how to treat a girl like that. When she's around, I feel so—" he hesitated, not knowing exactly how he felt, hunting for the word with another vague motion of his hand— "so . . ."

Etienne laughed slyly. "That sounds funny coming from you. I never saw you at a loss with a woman before, Drake."

EBEN HAZARD'S Lazy Hook spread skirted the eastern edge of Tucson just north of the Old Spanish Trail, the sprawling adobe house and large packpole corrals set in a hollow of foothills whose low cactus-studded crests overlooked the town. Midge Lawrence rode her jaded dun sullenly beside Drake on his stockinged black as they cantered down the rutted wagon trace, Etienne bringing up the rear on an outrageously fat albino. Drake saw the Lazy Hook hands gathering in a little bunch across the pattern of packpoles formed by the first corral, and he sat a little straighter on his horse, feeling the first tension in him. Gerder? Maybe. Or maybe the trouble in Tucson.

Who knew?

Over the plod of the horses as they slowed to a trot came the sudden hard drum of boots, and Drake saw Eben Hazard running from the house toward the corral at a hard jog, shouting at them. "Midge! Midge, where have you been? I was worried sick—"

Then he must have seen who rode beside her, because he slowed down, and he was walking as he reached the other men at the corral, and then stopped. Eben Hazard was a large, florid man, the pure white shock of hair accentuating the ruddy flush in heavy cheeks that might have come from sun or drink, or both, and he stood with his expensive Justins spread wide apart to support the solid bulk of his thick torso. Drake halted his horse and managed to keep his black from turning toward Hazard as he stepped off.

"Gerder in your string again, Eben?"

Hazard's answer came spontaneously enough, but his heavy, vibrant voice had a sullen sound. "I haven't seen Bart Gerder since I found him writing a wrong tally up in my brand book three years ago. How is it you're with Midge?"

"She hit my spread last night," said Drake, glancing at the girl where she sat stiffly on her dun, her chin up so her eyes met neither his nor Hazard's. "Running from Gerder. She said he wanted something of her father's. Cut her off from heading this way when she got away."

Drake was watching Hazard's reaction but could ascertain nothing from it as the heavy man stiffened, glancing sharply up at the girl. "I told you not to get that far from home while this mess was going on, Midge. Gerder's bunch is running wild now

that Farrow's grip is off the town. They've been held down so long by Farrow there's no telling what will happen." He tried to soften his voice. "Never mind, honey, it's all over now. You just get down and we'll give you a good hot meal and keep you here."

Drake saw the way she pulled away, muttering, "I've had a good hot meal. I'm not staying here, Eben, I can't. I'm going to get a room in town. Let me go, Eben."

"Don't be a little fool, Midge, you can't go into town. That's the most dangerous place for you now. You're not of age and you're under my protection and you'll do as I say. Get off that dun—" he tried to catch her by the waist with both hands and pull her to one side so he could lift her off bodily—"get off now. I'm losing my patience with you."

"Hold your hand, Eben," said Drake, catching at the man's arm. "She isn't one of your balky mules."

"Stay out of this, Drake," shouted Hazard, his face almost purple with rage now, jerking at Drake's grasp. "She's my ward, and I'll handle her the way I think best. She's a wilful, stubborn, foolish little girl, and she has to be taught a lesson. Running off to your place like that. It ought to show you. Why didn't she come to me That would have been the proper thing. No, she has to run off to a gambler's house—a bachelor's house at that."

"That doesn't give you the right to pull her around," said Drake, yanking at him again as the heavy man tried to get Midge off. She was half out of her saddle now, fighting and kicking to get free, blazing anger in her eyes.

"Let go, Drake—" Hazard suddenly turned toward his men, who had spread away from the corral around the horses—"Kirk, get this man off me!"

KIRKBOOT was only a step away from Drake. He was Hazard's foreman, a big ugly man with a broken nose. A couple of other hands shifted with him as he took that first step to get Drake, and then they all stopped, looking up past Drake, in a surprised way.

"I have here," said Etienne Villeneu from the fat back of his albino horse, "a French Le Mat. In the cylinder are nine .38 caliber revolver bullets for the upper barrel, and serving as a base pin for the cylinder is a twenty-eight gauge shotgun barrel. There is a movable firing pin on the hammer for either the upper barrel or the lower, and if any of you men wish to test the efficiency of this singular weapon, you might tell me which load you would prefer, a .38 slug, or the buckshot, and I would be glad to adjust the firing pin accordingly."

It held the other men there, but Hazard had not quit trying to get Midge down, and she lost her balance suddenly and fell off onto him, and he stumbled back with her weight into Drake. Crying now in her anger, Midge fought at Hazard, trying to get free of him. He caught at her arm to keep from being mauled, and she cried aloud with the pain of his grip, pulling her arm up sharply to bite his hand.

"Damn you!" he roared, and Drake saw his heavy, hairy hand come back, and tried to stop it and couldn't.

Midge staggered back against her dun from the blow, and the pain was still in her twisted face as Drake jumped Hazard, catching him by the shoulder and whirling him around, putting all his hundred and seventy pounds into the punch. Hazard's feet left the ground as he went backward, and then struck again and the spike heels ploughed two furrows before he went over onto his back. Drake had time to see the others running in among the three spooked horses to put the animals between them and Etienne, and one of the men had a dally he snaked out in a neat hooley ann that caught the Frenchman as his first shot exploded, snagging him sideways off his albino. Then Drake was whirling to meet Kirkboot and his two men, staggering back under the sing of the foreman's heavy body crashing into him, and rolling a bony fist off his shoulder before it caught his face.

He knew it would unbalance him, but there were three of them, and it was the only way he could hope to get one out of the fight before they were all on him. Still going backward, he let one knee come up. He heard Kirkboot grunt sickly as the knee caught him, and when Drake went down, the foreman's weight came helplessly with him. Drake was twisting from beneath the man even before he hit, and was out from beneath Kirkboot, rolling away from the

other two men, and when he finally came to his feet again, Kirkboot was still huddled on the ground, his hands underneath him, moaning.

The other pair had come in a blind rush, meaning to hit Drake before he was in position, but he put his fist out while he was still crouched with rising, and the shock of the first man ramming into it almost knocked his shoulder out of joint. He jerked aside to let the man stumble on past with the blood already covering his face from a smashed nose, and threw himself in under the second one's cocked arms to get his shoulder in the belly and heave. The man's own momentum carried him over Drake's back and he landed on the top of his head with a sodden, cracking sound that brought a strangled scream from him. The other Lazy Hook hand was turning around in a fumbling way and pawing the blood out of his face so he could find Drake, but Drake saw what Hazard was doing, and jumped forward away from that last man.

Eben Hazard had grabbed a stirrup leather on Midge's frightened, rearing dun to pull himself erect, and must have only gotten fully to his feet when the two men had struck Drake, because he had just now let go the leather and taken a vicious step forward, going for his gun. Jumping away from that man toward Hazard, it was a spasmodic reaction for Drake's hand to shoot out that way, thumb cocked up, and slap down for his Knuckle Duster. His fingers were under the torn lapel of his coat before he stopped himself. Hazard was still fumbling to draw, his big Peacemaker not yet out of leather.

Going on forward in his jump, Drake shouted something he didn't recognize himself and pulled his hand from beneath his coat empty. His body slamming into Hazard knocked the man back against the rump of the dun, and with one hand he grasped the man's gun wrist, preventing it from pulling the Peacemaker quite free of the holster, and the gun exploded toward the ground, jarring up against Drake's grasp.

"I told you dirty *paillards,*" Drake heard Etienne shouting from somewhere on the other side of the whinneying rearing horses, "a flock of twenty-eight gauge for your Fricandeau," and the explosion of his Le Mat drowned out whatever else he yelled.

"Drake," cried Hazard brokenly, "Drake," and then Drake's free fist struck his face, knocking him back against the sidestepping dun.

"Not the same as fighting with a girl, is it, Eben?" snarled Drake, and hit him again, "not the same as hitting a girl."

"Drake!" choked Hazard once more, trying to jerk his Peacemaker free. Drake pulled it clear of leather for him, then twisted the man's thick wrist till Hazard made a strangled sound of pain and dropped the gun. The dun was clear away now, breaking for the corral with the spooked albino and the black, and when Drake put his fist into Hazard's face for the fourth time, he felt Hazard jerk back with nothing behind him and released the man so the blow could knock him completely over.

Swaying there above the owner of the Lazy Hook, panting, his lip bleeding, Drake could see the others. Etienne crouched on one knee on the other side of the spot where the horses had been, the dally rope still hanging around his neck and under one armpit, the smoking Le Mat in his pudgy hand. The Lazy Hook man who had thrown the dally lay holding a leg soaked with blood the way it seeps from a buckshot wound, and two others stood farther back, staring sullenly at the gun in the Frenchman's fist. Kirkboot still lay on his belly, along with the man Drake had thrown over his shoulder, and the man with the bloody face had apparently decided he wouldn't try anything else, alone. It was Midge finally, moving from where she had stumbled when Hazard had shoved her away from the spooked dun. Her eyes traveled from Hazard, on the ground, to Drake, and there was surprise in her voice more than anything.

"You didn't kill him," she said.

III

THE Indian name for the town had been Stjukshon, which meant Dark Springs, and Padre Easebio Kino was the first man to see it, building the mission of San Xaxier del Bac to the south of the Indian village, which he had named San Cosme del Tucson. Much of the Old Town, or El Barrio Libre, as the Mexicans called that neighborhood inhabited mostly by Negroes and Indians,

was still formed of the same adobe hovels that Kino had seen in the seventeenth century, but farther north on Meyer Street the dilapidated adobes gave way to new frame houses. The eastern portion of Tucson, around Plaza Militar, had been quiet enough; when Drake and Etienne and the girl rode in, but now as they entered West Corral from Scott, the clamor began to reach them. A pair of seraped Mexicans halted on the corner in the shadows of a low adobe, one of them motioning toward Drake, and from across the street a man called softly to someone within a cantina, and a Papago Indian and a bearded white man moved out of the dark door to stare.

"You're crazy to come in here now, Laramie," said Etienne. "Already they begin to pass the word. Every man on Convent will know you're coming before you even reach the Coronado."

Drake was stiff and sore from the fight, angry at himself for getting sucked into this. "Never mind. What did you mean back at the Lazy Hook when you said I didn't kill him, like that, Midge?"

There was a speculation in her eyes. "You had your hand on your gun."

"You said it as if you expected me to kill him."

She shrugged again, not answering, and Etienne chuckled. "I think she has been hearing too many stories about you, Drake. You would be surprised, mam'selle, how rarely Drakes does use that Knuckle Duster of his."

"But Hazard went for his gun first," said Midge. "He fully intended shooting you while you were taken up with fighting those other men. It would have been self-defense. You even had your hand on your gun. Any other man would have shot him."

"If you had known Drake as long as I have known him, perhaps you would understand a little better," said Etienne. "There are some gamblers who use a marked deck, and others who play a straight game. It would have looked like self-defense, perhaps, to us, and to the Lazy Hook hands, and there would be no one to say Drake dealt any cards from the bottom, but maybe Drake knew it wouldn't really have been self-defense—" Etienne tapped his heart—"in here. You saw the way Hazard was getting that gun out. He hadn't even cleared leather by the time Drake reached him."

There was still that speculation in Midge's eyes, watching Drake, and his own irritation drove him to it. "Next time I'll shoot the man, if that'll make you happier."

"Drake, don't talk that way," she murmured. "I realize you're angry with me for all the trouble I've caused. This is just going to make you madder. I went to Judge Petrie a couple of months ago, and he wouldn't help. Hazard's too big a man for Petrie to antagonize by appointing another guardian for me."

"Naturally Petrie didn't want to put in the petition himself," said Drake. "It's his own court which grants the appeal. But he's been my friend ever since I hit this town, and my putting in the appeal will take the responsibility off his shoulders." He turned on her abruptly. "And then I'm through, understand. I'll put in the appeal and see that it's carried through and get you a man who can take care of you right. Then I'm through."

"You don't need to sound so angry about it. If you feel that way, why did you even bother to take me away from the Lazy Hook this afternoon?"

"I can't see any man treating a kid like that."

"I'm not a kid."

"Let's forget it. I don't know why I should feel responsible for you, but—" his head turned toward the sound of boots hardheeling it up Corral away from them—"wasn't that Jack, Etienne?"

"Berry?" said Etienne. "Looks like him from the posterior. *Voilà!* It would seem Barton Gerder is setting up competition for the Coronado House."

THE running man had crossed the intersection of Corral and Convent and shoved through the batwing doors of the old Aces Up. There was a new sign above the façade, however. Gerder's Saloon. The hubbub ahead of them grew as they neared the intersection. The sidewalk rattled under a man's running feet, and he appeared around the end of the corner building, turning down Corral as the first shot clipped splinters from the sidewalk just behind him. His boots stirred the hot dust laying thickly over the plank walk, and it sifted up, dry

and fetid in Drake's nostrils, and then a second man reeled around the corner, firing again, and the acrid odor of powder smoke mingled with that of the dust. The first man ducked into an adobe Tienda, and the drunk with the gun emptied his weapon, knocking scarlet ristras of chile off the viga poles.

A bartender showed at the corner, running after the drunk. "Garcia," he shouted, "put that gun down, Garcia! . . ."

From behind him, Drake heard the clatter of wheels and the whooping of men. He caught at Midge's bridle and forced her over into the curb as a livery wagon careened by them, bouncing through the wheel-ruts, surrounded by half a dozen cowhands yelling at the frightened livery horses and turning their own ponies into the wagon, trying to tip it over. Drake reached the hitch-rack in front of the Coronado House on the northwest corner of Corral and Convent, and as he stepped off his horse and dropped the reins on the cottonwood rail, he caught sight of the men gathering on the plank walk beneath the wooden overhang of Gerder's Saloon on the southeast corner of the same intersection. The cowboys had turned the wagon over on down Corral, and the frightened driver was running back up the street, hazed by the whooping men, and the bartender and two bouncers were struggling with the drunk across the way, and all that noise only seemed to accentuate the silence of the men in front of Gerder's.

"Oui," said Etienne, "that was Jack Berry."

"And Gerder." Drake's voice was hardly audible. Then he turned to Etienne, speaking louder. "Stay at the door, Etienne, and let me know if Gerder makes any move."

The Coronado House had the usual crowd around the doors. Drake recognized most of them. Several rose from where they had been sitting in the deep sills of the windows flanking the doors, and the others moved out of Drake's way, something sullen in the way they watched him as he helped Midge up the high curb.

"Morning, Chad," he said.

The banker's son took out a cheroot and engaged himself in lighting it without raising his eyes to Drake. The gambler looked at several others he knew, and their glance was somewhere else. Shrugging, he shoved through the near pair of batwings, and heard Etienne follow him in and stop the doors from swinging and turn around to face the street. A dark man with his hair parted in the middle and plastered down, stood at the bar, the tails of his black cutaway whipping at his legs as he saw Drake in the gold-framed backbar mirror and whirled, and though there was not much expression on his face, Drake saw how it was here, too, and he began to realize how big a mistake he had made in bringing Midge to town. He felt like a man standing on sand that was rapidly slipping out from beneath him. He had expected some friends, at least, to remain. Enough, at least, to nullify whatever move Gerder might make long enough for Drake to get this over with.

"Hello, Keno," he said. "Sort of a surprise, finding Gerder established right across the street. Is that why you won't shake hands?"

The dark man had come reluctantly across the room, meeting Drake's eyes with some effort. "Things have changed, Drake—"

"So have my friends," said Drake. "I thought you'd have the guts to buck Gerder at least."

"It's sort of awkward, Drake—"

"Having me here, you mean? Afraid Gerder might take offense? Where's Colorado? Or is he even afraid to meet me?"

ANOTHER man had come over from the bar. He was slope-shouldered and thick-set and must have been able to slip his starched white choke-collars on over his head. He bit a cold black stogie into one corner of thick lips and his derby hat was pulled so low Drake could hardly find his eyes.

"Albert Binder," he said, and Drake got the idea he was introducing himself. "Drake? Glad to find you. Been hunting some time. Like to talk."

"I don't have time right now," said Drake.

"Represent Pacific Railroad Corporation," said the man, biting at his words the way he did his cigar. "Building their spur line from Santa Fe now and want the right of way on Apache Gap. Only way through the Tanque Verdes. Otherwise have to lay about two hundred extra miles of track around northwest corner of the Verdes to

reach Tucson—"

"I asked you where Colorado was," Drake said to Keno.

"So—they're willing to offer goodly sum to save them doing that—"

"Colorado disappeared a couple of days ago with the house owing him two weeks' back pay," said Keno, glancing at Binder enigmatically. "It seemed queer at the time."

"Am I to take it you don't think he left of his own volition?"

"It isn't like Colorado to leave that much money behind," said Keno.

"Gerder?"

Something passed through Keno's imperturbable eyes. "Who knows? Who knows anything in this town now? Gerder moved in across the street as soon as he heard Face Card was dead. Took half our business. What he couldn't get with cutthroat prices he practically forced over at the point of a gun."

"I don't see Judge Petrie around," said Drake. "He used to eat lunch here about this time."

"We've been serving Petrie's lunch to him in Face Card's office while he went through Face Card's papers. The court took over till you could get in."

"Who killed Face Card?"

Keno's voice held a growing withdrawal. "Farrow was smoked out in the office about two in the morning. There was too much noise going on at the gambling tables to hear the shot. We found him the next morning sitting at the desk with his face shot off, all his papers scattered over the room. Petrie's had a time putting them together again."

Drake touched Midge's elbow, meaning to move her down the bar toward the stairway at the rear of the house, but Binder got in their way again.

"Guess you didn't understand. Represent Pacific—"

"I guess *you* didn't understand," said Drake, and the sweep of his arm caught the stocky man across his chest and sent him crashing up against one of the tables on the other side. Without looking back at him, Drake guided Midge through the other tables of the front dining room, separated from the gambling hall by a low broad-topped rail covered with buttoned crimson plush.

Near the arched entrance into the gambling hall, a black-haired woman stood with her back against the bar, her elbows up on the mahogany, the soft light from the glass chandelier drinking in the rich wine of her gown and glittering across the jade buttons on her elbow-length suede gloves. Silently, as Drake passed, she removed one elbow from the bar and reached for her drink, raising it to him. Over the rim of the glass, her smoldering black eyes met his, and his thin lips worked into a faint, ironic smile.

"Donna," he said.

"Drake," she said, and took the drink.

With his hand still touching Midge's elbow, he could feel the distinct stiffening of her body. They were past the woman now, and he turned a little to see how Midge's chin had lifted.

"She's an exotic woman," said Midge.

Their boots echoed across the polished floor of the big gambling hall. "Where did you learn that word?"

She looked into his face abruptly, the smile there bringing a flush to her cheeks. "Did you know her very well?"

"Very well."

They passed a bored croupier leaning on his roulette table with a beer and a plate of pretzels, nodding at Drake, and the girl took a careful breath. "I imagine you've known many women . . . very well."

"Do you?" he said, and took a last look toward the front door as they mounted the carpeted stairs. Keno had come up to Donna at the bar, and both of them were looking after Drake, with something different in each of their faces, and Etienne's broad fat back blocked off one set of batwings. "I think it would behoove us to get this over as quickly as possible. Keno's got some bouncers, but Gerder might want you bad enough to take that chance."

IV

FACE CARD FARROW'S office overlooked Corral Street, light from its two bay windows spilling into the sumptuous room with in inch-thick nap on the carpet and several ponderous Gothic armchairs facing a huge Chippendale desk squatting on claw feet beneath a copy of Goya's Nude Duchess. Judge Oliver Petrie was sitting behind the desk, his white head bent over a

motley collection of papers and legal documents, a half-eaten lunch on the silver tray at his elbow. He looked up as Drake ushered Midge in, and it was surprise on his seamed, worried face at first, and then something else Drake didn't want to define.

"Laramie," he said, and his smile didn't stay on very long. He waved a gnarled hand at the papers. "I'm glad you've come, in a way, and sorry, in another. Face Card's papers have to be taken care of, but this town's no place for you right now. Farrow's whole machine fell apart with his death, and every enemy he made is riding the high horse now. You saw Gerder's saloon. When he finds you have the papers—"

"But I didn't come here for the papers—"

"They're yours, Drake!" Petrie's surprise seemed genuine. "You know how Farrow was fighting to keep you from pulling out. I think he was afraid you knew too much, Drake."

"I didn't know anything. I never touched his politics. If he wanted to mess that end, I didn't mind, but I kept my cards down on the poker tables—"

"Face Card had a petition in the courts restraining you from dissolving the partnership until you'd settled your own personal debts to the firm's satisfaction. It took the court several weeks to find those claims of your debts were erroneous, and we hadn't yet refused the petition when Face Card was killed."

"His death dissolves the partnership automatically."

"Yes," said Petrie, "but as you were technically still his partner at the time of death, and as he has no living relatives in evidence, his estate falls to you. I don't care what you do with the Coronado House or the other liquid assets—sell it to Keno, if you want, or even Gerder—I don't care. But you've got to help me with Farrow's papers, Drake. They're dynamite. Not the actual documents we have here, but the possession of them. A lot of them are gone. Obviously the reason he was killed. He was found with the papers all over the room. I know, for instance—though I could never do anything about it—that Face Card had a signed confession from Jack Berry admitting the killing of Pablo Senora in Prescott in 1897. You remember what a big smell that business caused. Farrow's possession of that confession was one reason he could hold Gerder down so tight, Gerder and Berry being such close cronies. That paper is gone. One of the things which leads me to believe there are a number of other papers missing. The same type of papers. Things which gave Farrow his control over so many men."

"You think Gerder—"

"I don't know, I don't know," said Petrie. "All I'm trying to show you is the significance of these papers. Everybody knows they contained evidence enough to send half the men in Tucson to jail, and it must be rather obvious to everyone that Farrow was killed by some man he had been blackmailing, in order to destroy the evidence. But they don't know which papers were taken and which weren't. If it were not Gerder, for instance, who shot Farrow, then Gerder would have no way of knowing whether that confession of Berry's was destroyed, or still in evidence, and he would do a lot to try and gain it if he thought it was in a position to damage him."

"You're saying that whoever holds those papers is a target for all the men Farrow was blackmailing, no matter whether the stuff he used to control them is still there or not," said Drake. "All right. What can I do?"

"Take the papers," said Petrie. "They're your legal property, along with everything else. There are still a few things left among them we can use against some of the men I've been waiting to nail a long time, but we'll have to wait till things settle down in Tucson, and we have some kind of law to back up whatever move the courts make. Sheriff Kennedy was Farrow's man, and he's afraid to show his nose out his office door now. The town marshal was shot up in a street fight last week."

"All right," said Drake. "I'll take the papers off your hands, even announce publicly that I have them, if you'll do something for me. I tried to tell you I came here for Midge. How did you ever pick Eben Hazard for her guardian?"

"What do you mean?" Petrie's voice held something defensive. "I didn't pick him. He's her uncle, the nearest living relative."

"He's no man to raise a kid like Midge. When I brought her back this morning he yanked her around like she was a honky-

tonk girl and knocked her down. I have an idea that isn't the first time."

Petrie pursed his lips, waved a deprecatory hand. "Surely you can't mean that, Drake. Perhaps he just lost his temper. She's a—" he glanced at Midge—"a rather stubborn child. I know by experience."

"Stubborn or not, no man has a right to knock her around like that," said Drake. "I thought she was exaggerating things till I saw that this morning. I knew Hazard had a mean temper, but I didn't think he was the kind to take it out on a kid—"

"I'm not a kid," said Midge hotly.

THE right-hand window was open halfway, and Drake became aware of the utter silence in Corral Street below. It was ominous, somehow, after the clamor. He stepped to the desk, grabbing the carved edge with both hands.

"Listen, Oliver, something's started down there. Are you going to get a new guardian for Midge, or aren't you? I'm not taking her back to Hazard. She's in some kind of trouble. Gerder's after her for something he thinks her father had. It might even be mixed in with this business about Face Card Farrow. She needs someone capable of protecting her and treating her like a human being."

Petrie looked at the desk. "Hazard's chairman of the Tucson Cattlemen's Association, Drake. They're about the only hope the law-abiding citizens have left in this town. We can't afford to offend him now; we're in a bad enough tight without lining up any more against us—"

"I guess I should have seen it before." Drake's voice was bitter, because he had considered this man his friend. "You're quite willing to put me on the spot handing me those papers, but you don't want to take any cards in the game yourself."

"They're your legal responsibility—"

"And it's your legal responsibility to see that Midge Lawrence is properly taken care of. Are you going to do it, Oliver, or am I going to take it to a federal court? That wouldn't put you in a nice light, you know!"

"Now, Drake, you're in no position to make any move like that. You'd better take Midge right back to Hazard, or you'll find yourself subpoenaed for abduction of a minor. You know I'm your friend, and I'd do anything I could, but we're just up against something bigger than us—"

The door rattled to someone's knock, and then the croupier pushed in without invitation, still eating his pretzels. "Keno sent me up, Drake. Gerder's started across the street. He's got a big bunch, and it looks like business."

"It's the papers," cried Petrie. "He knows I'm up here with Farrow's papers—"

"Don't be a fool, it's Midge he wants!" Drake turned to the croupier. "Tell Etienne to come on up. We'll take the back way out." Petrie tried to get around the desk and past Drake, but the gambler caught him by the lapel. "Oliver, are you going to put through a petition for another guardian?"

"Drake, I told you—"

"All right." There was something final in Drake's voice, and he turned toward the desk, scooping up Judge Petrie's big leather case to begin stuffing papers into the pockets. "All right, Petrie. You dealt this hand. Whatever happens from here on out, just remember that. You dealt it. You want me to take Farrow's papers? You're damn right I will. If you don't have the guts to use them, I will. You think Tucson's in a mess now; you don't know what a mess looks like. I'll put on so much pressure Corral Street will come apart at the seams. They don't know what I do have here, and what I don't have, and when I start the squeeze you'll be surprised at the men that pop out of the warsack. It doesn't matter if most of the evidence was taken. It's as good a way to find out who murdered Face Card Farrow as any. Find the man who doesn't jump when I threaten him with this, and you'll have the killer. If it wasn't Hazard who killed Farrow, I won't need a federal court to make him move. I'll have Eben himself putting in the petition for another guardian for Midge. Now get out of my way—"

Shoving Midge ahead of him, he brushed past the pale judge and out the door. Etienne waited at the bottom of the stairs, his Le Mat in his hand. As Drake ran down the stairs, Donna Claire came from beneath them where the hall led to the back door. He saw the look on her face and didn't need any more.

"About a dozen of them, Drake. They ran a linchpin wagon across the end of the

alley. You wouldn't stand a chance of getting out the back way. Gerder even has some men across Corral watching the windows on that side." She came in close, ignoring Midge to catch at his arm, looking up into his face. "Drake—"

"It's all right, Donna," he said. "How about the front, Villey?"

"They already got our horses," said Etienne, twirling his waxed mustache. "Keno has some bouncers behind the batwings. I don't know how long that will last."

Drake moved toward the front, shoving the brief case into Etienne's hands. "We've got to get out some way. It might as well be the front door. If anything happens to me, Villey, get that brief case to the marshal's office at Prescott."

"If anything happens to you, Laramie," said Etienne, "it will happen to me, also."

"Drake—" Midge clutched at his arm, following him so close she bumped against him, tripping on his feet. "I'm going with you. Don't leave me."

"Don't worry, honey." He had one arm around her shoulder, half-running through the gilded archway, calling to the bartender. "Henry, how about that Greener?"

HENRY was standing with one red, hammy hand on the polished mahogany, looking through the front windows. He reached beneath the bar without speaking and came up with a scattergun, tossing it to Drake. The gambler took his arm off Midge's slender shoulders to catch the sawed-off weapon deftly, and then he stepped around in front of her.

"Keep in close behind me," he said. "I never saw a scattergun yet that wouldn't stop a crowd."

He did not know who had gotten in his way till the man began to speak in that toneless, mechanical voice. "Don't be a fool. That crowd's after you! Don't be a fool, Drake. Out for blood. Now P. R. is willing to pay you—"

"Did I ever tell you how I made *Filets de Levraut à la Mornay,* M'sieu Pacific Railroads," said Etienne, pushing his Le Mat in between Drake and Binder, and gently shoving the short man backward with the flat of its barrel. "First I trim the filets of two leverets, compre? Then I cut the filets into slices, one inch diameter and one-third inch thick. . . ."

Drake had moved on past by then, and Keno's heavy-shouldered bouncer was the only man left between him and the batwings. "How about it, Sam?"

Sam Marshal moved away from the doors, shaking his head. "I wouldn't try it, Drake. I've bucked a lot of crowds in my time, and it's the quiet ones that are the worst. If I hadn't been watching all the time, I wouldn't know this bunch was out there. I wouldn't try to do a darn . . ."

The hot suffocation of the dust was the first thing that struck Drake as he stepped through the slatted doors. There might have been a dozen men in Gerder's crowd, shifting in toward the empty sidewalk in front of the Coronado House. A short ugly man in a black hat and a loud vest had taken the reins of the three horses off the rack, and Jack Berry and Barton Gerder and three or four others were already on this side of the rack mounting the curb. None of them had drawn guns yet, but when the batwings popped open before Drake, Gerder stopped with one foot on the high plank walk, and Drake saw his shoulder rise, and several others.

"Don't do it, Bart," said Drake, moving out into the shadow beneath the overhang. The bunched muscles of his jaw drew that odd scar pattern taut across his high cheekbone. "I've got a pair of twelve gauges in this Greener that will blow the belly right out of the first man who gets his iron free, and I can see every one of you."

Gerder took his foot off the walk as Drake came out. "You'll never make it, Drake. Corral's full of my men from Meyer to Convent. That scattergun won't last you out."

"This scattergun will take anybody to hell with me that wants to go," said Drake. "Just keep moving back, Bart. Drop those reins, Italy."

"Keep moving those nags out, Italy," snarled Gerder.

The man in the loud vest looked from Gerder to Drake's Greener, and dropped the reins. "You want these nags moved out, Gerder, you'll have to do it yourself."

"Close to me, kid," muttered Drake, and felt Midge's hands small and soft hanging onto his coat, her body bumping up

against him with every other step as he moved across the walk, swinging the scattergun slowly from right to left. He had seen the threat of a shotgun control a crowd when nothing else would, and it was doing that now. There was no fear in Gerder's face, but he backed on out into the street. There was fear in the other faces, and they spread away, too. The sunlight struck Drake a hot blow as he stepped from the shade beneath the overhang and stood on the edge of the curb. He was reluctant to lose whatever advantage this height gave him, and he let the Greener swing toward Italy again. "Now bring them in here."

Sweat greased Italy's face as he got the reins again and led the horses into the curb. The men shifted restlessly out in the sun, and Drake felt the first impatience rake his loins with its small claws, and tried to down it, knowing what a mistake that would be. Yet he couldn't help wondering how much longer they would hold, out there. Gerder's jaw was sticking out, lower lip working across his upper that way, and Drake could see the rise and fall of his chest.

"You'll never make it, Drake. You've got the whole town to ride through, and you'll never make it."

This was the showdown.

Drake mounted his black first, so as to keep himself between the crowd and Midge. He sat turned in the saddle with the shotgun across his lap while Midge and Etienne stepped up. Gerder's crowd began to spread out, moving in nervous little eddies toward the other curb. Jack Berry started to shift in the direction of Corral Street.

"Stop it," said Drake swiftly. "Stand right where you are! Gerder, if anybody starts firing on me, I'll shoot you. I swear I'll burn you down in cold blood, no matter who it is!"

BUT the others continued their spreading movement, and Gerder had begun backing toward the water trough in front of the livery barn next to his saloon. Drake realized it would be but a moment before the men at the fringes would be out of his control. Etienne understood how he wanted it, and had begun moving Midge's dun forward at a slow, deliberate walk, but Drake knew it couldn't be like that now. He was about to speak when Midge shouted.

"Drake, watch out. Berry—"

It took all the efforts in Drake not to turn toward Berry. "Jack," he shouted, "Gerder gets it if you—" and then the shot cut him off, and his horse screamed shrilly, rearing up, and though Barton Gerder was still out there in the open, Drake couldn't bring himself to down the man in cold blood, and he twisted on around in the saddle of the plunging horse for Berry.

There was a phaeton parked beyond the hitchrack almost at the corner of this side of the street, and Jack Berry had thrown himself behind that for his protection with his first shot. He fired again, and Drake's flat-topped Stetson was jerked from his head. All Drake could see of Berry was his legs through the spoked wheels of the phaeton, and he let go both barrels. Then he dropped the Greener, whirling to keep from being thrown off his horse without seeing the effect of his shot.

With the scattering crowd shouting and pulling their guns all about him, Drake screamed at Midge and Etienne, "Go on, I'm with you, go on—"

He saw that Gerder had thrown himself behind the water trough, hauling out his gun, but as the man rose up, Etienne's Le Mat roared, chipping bark off the hollow, undressed log of the trough, forcing Gerder to throw himself back to the ground. Drake slammed a fist into the neck of his screaming, rearing black, knocking it down, and then kicked it viciously in the belly. The horse jumped forward with the pain, stumbling before it got all four feet going. Drake questioned that, momentarily, but the horse was in full gallop now, and he was choking in the dust boiling up from the two horses ahead of him.

"Get their animals," shouted Gerder, jumping up from the water trough and opening fire, "get their animals. . . ."

But Drake was already past the bulk of the crowd, and a last man threw himself toward the curb from in front of the charging trio, too occupied with saving his own skin to use his gun. The shouts grew dim behind Drake, and he urged his black up to catch Midge. They had passed the intersection of Convent and Ochoa when the horse stumbled again, and it came to Drake abruptly then. No wonder the animal

had screamed and reared at Berry's first shot; it hadn't been merely spooked by the gunfire, it had been hit. Even with the realization, Drake felt the black stumble a third time beneath him, and sensed how it was and kicked free as the horse went to its knees. Had he gotten free a moment later, he would have been thrown over its head; as it was, he rolled off to the side, with some control over his own precipitation, striking with his left foot first and taking most of the shock on the soft part of his buttocks, then going on down to tumble it off on his shoulders. He rolled into the high curb with a force that stunned him and heard his own groan from very far away as he tried to rise. The black lay out in the street with its forefeet twisted beneath it. The sidewalk above him clattered to someone's feet, and he heard the man shout in a hoarse voice:

"It's Drake, it's Laramie Drake!"

There was the creak of batwings, and the sidewalk groaned to the weight of more men, clattering as they moved over it. Drake got to his hands and knees, facing back toward Ochoa. Beyond the intersection, he could see a scattered bunch of riders coming, some of them just breaking away from the racks down in front of Gerder's Saloon and the other buildings near Corral. He caught at a rough pole supporting the wooden overhang above, pulling himself erect, and the men near the curb shifted back on the sidewalk indecisively. Drake saw one man's hand move down, and then stop, and he shoved himself out toward the middle of the street, fumbling beneath his coat for the Reid.

"Go on," he screamed hoarsely at Midge and Etienne, where they had hauled their horses to a halfway down the block, and were turning, "go on, Gerder's coming and you'll never make it if you come back. Do you hear me, Etienne! Go on, damn you, go on—"

He was faced around enough to see the first rider cross Ochoa, and it was Italy, with Barton Gerder right behind him; and they both had their guns out. The brass cylinder on the Knuckle Duster caught the sun in a brazen flash as Drake pulled it out, spreading his legs and shaking his head to clear the wool out. Then the ground was shaking beneath his feet, and he was almost knocked over by the sweaty flank of the big dun.

"Climb up," shouted Midge, her red hair flying about her flushed face. "You didn't think we'd leave you? Climb up."

"Damn you," he said, but there was a small, wry smile lifting the corner of his mouth as he grabbed her leg and slipped his foot into the stirrup she had vacated. Facing toward the animal's rump, he pulled himself up behind the cantle, arms around her waist. Etienne had necked his sweating albino around them, beginning to fire at Gerder. Drake saw Italy haul his horse to a sudden hock-splitting halt, and then roll off the side into the street.

"Get him," shouted Gerder, not even trying to pull his horse aside as it clattered over Italy, waving his gun at the men on the sidewalk, "get Drake, I tell you—"

The dun broke into a gallop under Midge's bootheels, and then a dead run, and the frame houses of the residential district began to make a blurred pattern past them as they raced toward Congress. Drake turned them down this street toward the Santa Cruz River, breaking from the scattered adobe hovels on the outskirts of town into the first stand of black cottonwoods. In the marshy ground west of the river proper they turned north, slowing to a walk through the somber, stunted postoaks. They could hear Gerder's riders crashing through the cane and pussywillows behind. When Drake reached the spot he approximated to be opposite Alameda, he turned them westward again, reaching the solid ground with mud and gramma dropping off the horse's legs.

"Drake," said the girl sharply, "you're going right back into town."

"Which is the last place Gerder will look for us," he said.

V

A WILD turkey was gobbling somewhere up in the higher timber and a chicken hawk was making lazy circles in the smoky sky above the crested ridges, and the three of them walked their horses down the narrow road that lowered itself like a white ribbon gently down the dark timbered slope into the flats below. It was two days after Tucson. As Drake had said, Gerder wasn't looking for them to head directly back into

town, and had probably spent an hour coursing the marshy ground west of the river, while they rode west on Alameda until they struck the Tanque Verde Road, reaching Drake's house in the mountains late that night. Dropping now into the Pinaleno Basin, Drake eased himself in the saddle with the stiffness of the long ride east from the Tanque Verdes, his voice irritable.

"It seems crazy to be carrying on any regular business while this thing about you is up in the air."

"What good would it do you to stay back at your spread?" said Midge. "Besides, you already contracted to take this herd on. You can't afford to lose the money breaching the contract would mean. I've caused you enough trouble already."

He glanced at her from under his dark brow, trying to define the feeling in him. She was so unlike the other women he had known; the freshness of her, the purity, caught at him sometimes like this, when he could see the fruitlike curve of her young cheek beneath the tilt of her level hatbrim, the lithe youth of her slim body in the square cut of the blue denim ducking suit. Then he saw Etienne watching him from the other side of the girl.

"*Oui,* Drake," the fat Frenchman chuckled, "*oui. . . .*"

The laugh made the girl turn to Etienne. "What?" she said, and then she saw how he was looking past her to Drake and twisted the other way to the gambler. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Drake turned his eyes ahead, wondering if the sudden heat in his face meant he was flushing, and Etienne's chuckle angered him. The first haze raised by the cattle gathered in the basin had reached them now, and the road reached the bottomlands and left the flank of the Pinalenos, turning through a snake fence that crawled across the grassed flats. Now Drake could hear the bawl of cattle, and he felt an excitement fill him. His cattle. It pleased him to be able to say that. His cattle. He hadn't realized how much all this would mean to him. Waco Simms came riding out from the herd to meet them now, Drake's ramrod, a lean, dusty man with dim origins in Texas he never referred to, sitting his big double-rigged roping saddle with a slouchy ease. He raised a scarred, calloused hand to his hatbrim for Midge, and turned keen gray eyes on Drake.

"Some old Mexican blackhorns in the bunch. They don't carry as much beef as the whitefaces, but they're good enough stock. Should take us the rest of this day to tally out the number you wanted. Delhaven was supposed to send out a crew to help us, but all he did was have one man to rep for him. Left us shorthanded."

Drake saw the eager light in Midge's eyes. "I could help."

"Don't be silly, Midge," said Drake. "We haven't reached that point yet."

"But I want to do something, Drake," she said. "Waco, tell him I could help."

Waco scratched the lobe of his ear, grinning wryly. "I seen her work them Anchor cattle when I was repping for Hazard, Drake. She is right handy with a dally."

Drake started to say something, but saw the stubborn pout that had entered the girl's underlip and shrugged, smiling himself. Midge rode ahead with Waco back to where they were working the cattle, and Etienne sidled his albino in close to Drake's animal.

"So you don't know what to do with her," chuckled the Frenchman.

Drake turned sharply. "What do you mean?"

"You make a better nursemaid than you realize," said Villeneu. "Or than you want to admit. Why don't you put in a petition for yourself as guardian of the girl?"

"Don't be obtuse, Villey."

"You're going to miss her when she goes, Drake. Already the house is a different place. You weren't even restless last night. You sat in your big chair and smoked your pipe and listened to her read like a complacent old man."

Drake gigged his horse ahead impatiently, angry at himself for not being willing to admit Etienne was right, yet withdrawing from it, somehow. She was only a kid. He was thirty-five years old, and she was only a kid, and it didn't make a hand, that way.

THEY had about a hundred head left to brand, and Midge dismounted from her dun and began to unhitch the saddle. Drake stepped off near the branding fires where a tall, angular man in a flat-

topped black hat was standing with a brand book. Waco introduced him as Davis Witmer, the man repping for Karl Delhaven, owner of the Kid-on-a-rail cattle which they were turning over to Drake. A rider hazed in a cow and dabbed his dally on and the ground shook beneath Drake as the animal went down. Another hand hog-tied her with peales before she could slip the dally.

"Hot iron," he called, and a third man got a branding iron from the fire and came on the run. "Brindle heifer, swallow-fork, Kid-on-a-rail."

"Brindle heifer, swallow-fork, Kid-on-a-rail," repeated Witmer, writing it down in his book.

Drake watched them draw a line through the Kid-on-a-rail brand with a bar stamp, and then use his own new Double Deuces stamping iron to burn on the pair of twos. The Kid-on-a-rail earmark had been a swallow-fork, and the heifer bawled raucously when the cowhand grabbed her ear to cut Drake's seven undercut in. Then they jerked off the peales and let the animal scramble erect to be hazed into the herd which had already been worked over. It was then Drake saw that Midge had picked out a pinto pony from a bunch Waco had in the rope corral near the cottonwoods, and was saddling it up.

"Waco," he said sharply, "I didn't think she meant cutting."

"What else?" grinned Simms. "That kid should have been a boy, Drake. She'll be all right. Release one of my cutters for the fires, and we can work that much faster."

Midge trotted the pinto out, her hands light and deft on the reins feeling him out. As soon as she reached the herd, Drake began to realize how good she was. Cutting cattle was one of the most demanding jobs, requiring a singular skill and daring, and she went into it with the swift drive of an old hand, choosing a big steer near the flank of the bunch and cantering in on his quarter. The steer boogered and broke from the herd, giving her a line between the other animals and the single beef.

"That pinto's a good chopper," grinned Waco. "Real peg horse. He can turn on a biscuit and never cut the crust. Wouldn't trust him with many—there, see—"

The pinto had given the appearance of getting too far ahead of the steer, on the inside, but when the beef turned to try and get back in the herd, the pony spun on a hind foot and was in between the steer and the herd so fast the beef's head jerked up in surprise, and it whirled around to run toward the fire again. Hazing the cow on in toward the fires, the pony worked over to the left side of its own accord, and Midge shook out her dally. Within ten feet of Drake she dabbed it on, the pinto squatting like a jackrabbit, and before the steer had hit, the two men branding had run in with their peales to hog-tie the animal and throw Midge's rope off. As she snaked it in and turned back to the herd, she threw a happy smile at Drake.

"*Sacre*, she actually enjoys it," said Etienne. "A man who was planning to build a spread would do well to hitch up with a woman like that. He could just sit back and let her do all the cow work."

"Long yearling, swallow-fork, Kid-on-a-rail," Witmer was saying, writing it down in his book, and Waco had begun to squint up at the clouds sifting over the ridges of the Pinalenos to the east, muttering to himself, "Don't like them thunderheads. Spring rain'd turn this roundup in a bog ride."

Drake had heard them abstractedly. A man had ridden in through the snake fence on a big white horse that looked livery, and he was walking it steadily toward the branding fires. He was thickset and slope-shouldered, and must have been able to slip his choke-collars on over his head.

"Well, Binder," said Drake. "How is P. R. doing?"

"See you alone?" said Thomas Binder.

Drake shrugged, moved away from the fires, leaving Etienne with Waco. Binder followed on a mare till Drake halted, then got off with some effort. He took out a fresh cigar, offered it to Drake. Drake declined, and Binder bit off the end, spitting it out with a peculiar grimace.

"Nice job you did in Tucson other day," he said, as if he had been born with only so many words to use and intended to make them last to the end. "Didn't think any man could walk through that crowd

the way you did. Gerder spent half the day hunting for you down river way. About blew his top when he heard you'd ridden back through town on Alameda pretty as please. Now Drake, I—"

"Represent the Pacific Railroad Corporation," said Drake. "I know. I'm sorry if I was rude the other day. I guess you understand now why I was in such a hurry. I hadn't realized things would be quite that tight when I hit town. Not me, so much. The girl. What about Pacific Railroads? You can have all afternoon, now, if you want."

"Know they've been building to Tucson from Bisbee. Going straight through the Tanque Verdes saves them several hundred miles of track. Gap's the only way through. How much you want for it?"

"If you're talking about Apache Gap, I don't own it."

Thomas Binder looked as if he were regarding the most stupid man in the world. "Don't try to give us that, Drake. Might have hidden it from Tucson all this time, but we know everything. What's your price?"

Drake's irritation was rapidly becoming an anger. "I don't own the Gap. What makes you think I do?"

"Investigators," said Binder. "What I am. Maybe you want me to open the bid. Say twenty thousand."

HIS words came out tinny and mechanical, and his eyes were hard and bright and opaque on Drake all the time, and Drake felt the scar pattern draw taut across his cheek with the bunching of his jaw. He tried to keep his voice under control.

"I don't see how your investigators could find out I own Apache Gap. The nearest private land to the Gap I know of is Hazard's Lazy Hook. His north pastures run up to Cochise Ridge overlooking the Gap. Why don't you go to him?"

"Won't admit owning land that controls the Gap?" said Binder.

"I won't admit owning anything I don't own."

Binder took out his cigar again but didn't look at it. "What kind of a game, Drake?"

"I might ask you the same thing," said Drake heatedly.

"Bucking up an organization's busted bigger men than you, Drake." The staccato intonation to his words gave them a strange menace.

Drake leaned forward till his face almost met Binder's. "I don't know what the hell this is about, but I'd advise you not to threaten me."

Binder hadn't moved back. "Not threatening. Don't have to. You're intelligent enough to see implications. Can understand what might happen if you don't play ball. P. R. wants the Gap. Get it from you, one way, the other. Which way you want?"

Drake's answer was stopped by the clap of thunder; he straightened, realizing only now how dark the sky had become. The first drops of rain touched his face. The thunder came again, in deafening waves of sound, and he could see how the cattle were beginning to bawl and plunge in a frenzy. Waco Warren had mounted the men at the fires and run them in to help the circle riders start milling the cattle so they wouldn't stampede. One of the cutters who had been within the smaller herd forced his way to the fringes and broke free as the cattle began running more wildly in their mill. The thunder died momentarily, and Drake could hear the shouts of the men and the crazed bawl of cows, the dust rising up beneath the whirling vortex of beef only to be beaten back again by the slanting rain. Then, over all the other sounds, it came to Drake:

"Midge, get out of the herd. Why the hell didn't you tell me she was still cutting inside? Get her out, damn you, get her out—"

It was a sudden fear that swept Drake then, for he could see the small shadowy figure in the center of the smaller herd which had not yet been marked with Drake's Double Deuces, bobbing and jerking in a mad effort to get free. With the sweep of his arm, Drake shoved Binder aside and broke into a headlong run, the rain pelting at his hatbrim in rhythm to the pound of his boots. The circle riders were throwing their horses at the cattle in an effort to break the mill, but the steers made a solid wall of hurtling, whirling beef, and already one man had been thrown back, unhorsed. Then it was Waco's voice again, even as Drake saw it happen, dimly there, within the herd.

"I didn't know she was in there. Why the hell didn't you tell me? Break that mill, you fools, break that mill. Oh, my God, she's down, she's down!"

As a boy, Drake had seen a top hand do it in the middle of a spring-swollen river. The cattle had been in a mill there, too, and the hand had broken the mill that way, reaching the center and hooking onto an old lead steer and driving it right through the circling beefs to the opposite bank. This wasn't in the water, and he knew there would be no lead steer to help him. But he did not consider failure; there was no time for that. He only saw how the men had failed in breaking the mill from the outside, and he remembered how that top hand had done it in the river, and he meant to try it the same way, and he did not consider failure.

"Drake," screamed Waco, "don't be a damn fool. You can get in there that way—"

But Drake had already reached the fringe, quartering in until he was running in the same direction as the frenzied, circling, bawling cattle. It was all a blanket of sodden dust and pelting rain and running, blabbering beeves after that, and the steers were so full of primordial fear of the storm that they paid no heed to him as he threw himself into it. Drake missed his hold the first time and stumbled and almost fell and threw himself at the next running cow to come into his vision, and missed that time, too, and went down then, bowled over by the animal's flank. Chest heaving, mouth working with the pain in him, he struggled to his feet, dodging a heifer that came clattering around the fringe of the mill, and then saw the longhorns passing him, and reached out for his hold on that.

"Drake, you damn fool, you damn fool—"

But Drake had finally made his mount, running along beside the steer and grabbing the horn and leaping up like an Indian. Stunned and battered, coat ripped by the horns, he rode the steer around the mill. They were so tightly packed his inside leg was continually bumped and mashed by the bodies of the steers. He saw a big brockle-faced steer stumble and go down, to be trampled beneath the hoofs of those behind, the gap it left filled immediately. Then Drake was rising up to go for it. There were only some fifty-odd left in this herd, and crouched like that to leap, Drake could see the center of the mill.

THE cowhands always started the mill from the outside, turning the head of the running bunch till the leaders met the tail and the herd was going in a circle that gradually closed on itself and stopped when the cattle became too tightly packed to run any more. The outer circles were already pressing in so close they formed a solid mass of withers and rumps beneath Drake, but the inner ranks were still loose, with the open space yet showing in the very center. And in that space, Drake saw the peg-horse's head, appearing now and then amid the flashing horns and rising humpribs of the cows. He knew a moment's prayer that the cutting horse was as smart as it had looked working the cows, and then he made his leap.

A slashing horn caught at his pants, and he heard the cloth rip, and felt the stab of pain as the sharp tip raked his leg, and he threw himself on forward, desperately seeking footing on the tightly-packed backs, clawing at the horns to hold himself from falling. And all the time he was thinking of that horse. Stand still. Don't break now. For God's sake, just stand still. It's the only chance.

His foot slipped between two steers and he went to his crotch in the fetid press of bodies. The pain nauseated him, and his leg was crushed between the running animals. With bleeding hands he caught at another horn, hauling himself up on the steer's back, sprawled across the animal. Blindly he fought to crouch and leap again, his actions more instinctive than conscious now, and he must have been talking like that a long time before he heard himself.

"Just stand still. Good little horse. Damn good little horse. It's her only chance. Stay right there. Good little chopping horse. Oh, damn you, stay there, stand still, stay there—"

Then he realized it was his voice that had made the horse whirl. He was that close. It seemed as if he had been riding those steers for an eternity, yet it must have been but a few seconds from the first

jump. With a last wild cry, he leaped from the steer, hurtling bodily over the inside rank and striking the horse with a stunning force. He felt the mount stagger under the blow, and brace itself, and reel back against him. He had caught at the saddle leather, and he came out of the haze like that, fallen against the pinto with the inner ranks of steers bumping up against him now, pressed in by the outer animals. He realized there was but another instant. Midge lay between the pinto's forelegs, her face bloody, her clothes ripped.

"Hold it, hold it," Drake gasped at the horse, letting go the stirrup leather to reach for her, "good little horse, just stand, just hold it," and his greatest fear in that moment was that the animal would break and bolt in this last instant. He caught Midge by the shoulders and pulled her free. Her body was light and soft and limp in his arms, and sodden red hair brushing his face as he heaved her across the pony's withers; then he swung aboard the animal himself, leg striking a steer, and pulled his Knuckle Duster. The pinto was staggering back and forth as the cows struck it from all sides now, and Drake could feel it quivering with fear beneath him, yet it waited his command. He kicked the horse at the same time he fired, and the mount leaped forward as the big steer stumbled and fell, leaving a gap for that moment in the running ranks.

The .41 Reid packed a big punch, but it was only his nearness to the cattle which enabled him to down them instantly like that, picking a spot behind their ears. He was practically riding on top of them, and he rammed sideways into a big sorrel steer and almost touched its head with the tip of his Knuckle Duster when he fired; the steer jerked perceptibly, went to its knees, then disappeared beneath the trampling hoofs, and Drake had rammed the pony into the gap, firing again, again, again.

BEHIND him there was no open space left in the center, where Midge had lain the moment before, and Drake could see how the steers of the inner ranks were constantly being sucked into that whirlpool forming the hub of the mill, eventually to go down and be trampled beneath the vortex of running, smashing animals. Then Drake pulled the trigger on his Reid, and it didn't buck in his hand, and he knew that was all. He was too exhausted, too beaten for feeling much at that, and with a hopeless sob he slumped forward over Midge, dripping rainwater off his soggy hair and blood off his face onto her torn blue denims, letting the pinto have its head to move helplessly around the mill with the bawling cattle. A steer's horn hooked him in the side, and he did not even cry out with the pain. His legs were pinned to the pinto's lathered sides by pressure of the hot, stinking, hairy bodies.

Finally, it came to him, through the apathy of pain and exhaustion, that the steers were not whirling as fast as before. The mill had wound up so tight it wouldn't whirl any more, and the cattle were slowing. From the fringes, men called softly now, working gently at the cattle, cutting off one at a time so as not to frighten them again. Finally Drake saw his chance and broke through the last few between him and the open; he could drive the pinto no farther than the edge, and slid off the horse, almost going to his knees. Waco Simms and Villeneu were beside him, and he heard himself mumbling brokenly.

"Horse was in there standing over her, standing right over here. . . ."

"What'd I tell you," said Simms softly. "Best peg horse in Arizona. Smartest chopper you kin find."

"Small herd, see," sobbed Drake. "Couldn't have done it with a big bunch. Too far to the middle. Lucky it was a small herd, see. Started going down in the middle right after I got out. That's what she would've gotten. That horse stood right there. Didn't move an inch. Small herd, see . . ."

"We know, *mon ami,* we know," said Villeneu, as if he were speaking to a child, and tried to draw Drake away. "You've taken a bad beating, *hein?* You better lie down—"

"No." Drake pulled away from him. "No. Midge, Midge?"

"She looks all right," said Waco. They had laid her down in the grass, and he was dabbing at the cut on her forehead while a hand went for some water. "A horn must have hooked in her clothes here and pulled her off the pony and she struck her forehead when she hit."

She was opening her eyes even then, and she looked up past Simms, and saw him, and said it softly. "Drake."

"Midge," he said, and that was all he had waited for, and he felt himself sagging back into Etienne's fat arms, and all the pain and exhaustion receded from him with the swift wash of a wave leaving the shore, and his consciousness left the same way.

VI

THE Tanque Verdes eastward from Apache Gap were rich with spring and the barrel cactus marched across the flatlands, bearing its yellow wreath of delicately fluted flowers proudly, and higher up the slopes the tree toads filled the night with their endless chirping. From where he hunkered on a bare ridge-top, Drake could see the fires of the cow-camp below him; straight ahead he could see where this slope melted into Apache Gap itself, a narrow notch through the Verdes which cattlemen had been using to reach the spreads beyond since the first Spanish blackhorns had been driven into Tucson.

Drake had taken his Winchester from the saddle boot, and when he realized it was no longer the tree toads, his hand tightened about the carbine and he let himself slide down behind the rock. It came again, the sibilation of some movement through the gramma in the timber below him. Then the moon shone on the figure moving out into the park. Drake rose slightly to show himself. The figure halted momentarily.

"Drake?"

"Yes," he said softly.

Midge moved on toward him across the open meadow, reaching the uplift of sandstone concealing him. "I saw you leave. You aren't well enough to go wandering around at night like this, Drake. You took a terrible beating from those cattle day before yesterday, and this ride hasn't helped any."

"I want to get them to the Double Deuces as quick as possible," he said. "Waco saw a rider up here near sunset."

She dropped down beside him abruptly, "Gerder?"

"I don't think Gerder would know of this drive," he said. "There was that man representing the P. R. Thomas Binder. He left before I could speak with him again after that mill."

"But why should he—?"

"I don't know, I don't know!" He waved his hand impatiently.

Her laugh was small and soft. "You're not like any gambler I ever saw, Drake."

"If you mean I don't have a dead pan, I can't help that," he said. "I always did well enough without it."

"More than that. Most of the card men I've known were jaded, world-weary." She touched his face, hesitantly. "Where did you get those scars?"

"A man got after me with a broken bottle in Abilene."

She lifted her head to look at him, and a decision came into her face slowly. "Drake, were you in love with Donna?"

Was that what she had been leading up to? "Why do you ask?"

She lowered her eyes suddenly, and in the moonlight, he could see the delicate flush tinting her cheeks. "The way she looked at you, the way she spoke—"

He had the sudden sense of holding something infinitely fragile, that even the wrong breath might shatter, and his voice was sober when it came, "No, Midge, I wasn't in love with Donna."

There was an ineffable relief in the way Midge took her breath, without looking up at him, and watching the soft glow of moonlight across her red hair, he realized how much it pleased him to sit out here beside her, with the tree toads making their music and the heady fragrance of the spring grasses lifting up to them. Then he caught himself. Damn fool, he thought, with a kid like this, and forced himself to speak of something that took him away from that.

"Midge, did it ever occur to you what would happen to the cattlemen in the Tanque Verdes if Rio Caballo was diverted at this eastern end of Apache Gap?"

She glanced at him, wondering, perhaps, why he had changed the subject so abruptly. "Rio Caballo runs right through the Gap. Cut it off at this end, and you'd deprive most of the Tanque Verdes spreads of their water supply."

"And that's just what the Pacific Railroad will do, if it takes the Gap through. There's a lot of places in the Gap that aren't wide enough for Rio Caballo and the P. R. tracks, too. The river would have to be di-

verted from this end, since its source is east of the Gap."

He heard her indrawn breath. "Drake, do you think that's what Gerder was talking about when he stopped me? He said something about the Gap."

"I'm beginning to think that's what this whole thing is about," said Drake. "Farrow's murder, maybe even your father's murder. Everybody knew the P. R. was building from Bisbee, but we took it for granted, coming from the south as they were, that they'd head around the southwest tip of the Tanque Verdes and avoid going through the mountains. It seems their engineers figured out a shorter route by cutting down on the eastern side and taking Apache Gap through. Who owns that strip on Cochise Ridge just above the Gap?"

"Dad used to," said Midge. "But he sold those pastures to Eben Hazard years ago."

"That's what I thought," said Drake. "Gerder must know it, too. Then why should he be hounding you in connection with it? And why should P. R. think I own land controlling the Gap?"

Midge sounded startled. *"You!"*

"It looks," he said, "as if they were just about as confused as we are," and then he stopped, because the tree toads had ceased chirping down in the timber again, and Midge had heard it, too, and had lived in this country long enough to know what that meant.

She slid down the uplift beside him till they lay, two shadowy forms barely perceptible against the rugged contour of the sandstone. One side of her body was warm against him, and he could feel the regular rise and fall of her breathing, and it told him something of the girl, that she could lie there and wait for this so calmly. He knew his own breathing was accelerated, and he kept searching the trees fringing the park. A small wind came up, growing through the timber below. Then it was the man, moving out of the banksian pine in a deliberate direction, casting a glance over his shoulder as if to get a last look at something, and the moonlight revealed who he was, as it had revealed Midge.

"Having a look at my cows, Colorado?" said Drake.

Colorado Carnes turned slowly, not trying to raise the Springfield bolt-action he held in his hand, as if, from long experience, he knew whoever spoke from cover like that would have a gun on him already. He was a tall, lean man, and Drake remembered when his well-tailored suit had been cleaner. He had his gray trousers tucked into fancy-stamped spurless Justins, and his flat-topped hat slanted at a cocky angle across his long-jawed face, hiding it in black shadow.

"Come on in and don't try to use the lead-pusher. It's Drake."

"Laramie," said Colorado, and moved forward openly. "You hooked up with that herd in the gully?"

"Driving them," said Drake. "You look like you've been sleeping in a ditch all week. Hiding out?"

"My connections with Face Card aren't any healthier than yours," said Colorado. "Being his bodyguard was dangerous enough when he was alive. With him dead, it's like I'd been holding a loaded gun to my head all this time and suddenly decided to cock it."

"Is it?"

Colorado stopped in front of the uplift abruptly, and the heartiness was gone from his voice. "You sounded skeptical."

"Was that the only reason you left Tucson in such a hurry you forgot to collect the two weeks' pay owed you?" said Drake, and rose with his Winchester cuddled in one elbow so that it still pointed in Colorado Carnes' general direction.

Colorado seemed to sense what was inside Drake, and his mouth broke into a loose-lipped grin. "What else?"

"Who murdered Face Card?"

Midge had stood, then, and Colorado's grin broadened without gaining any mirth. "Ah, the Lawrence kid. I heard you had appointed yourself her guardian, Drake. You're really up a crick, aren't you? Half the men in Tucson after your hide because you were affiliated with Face Card Farrow, the other half looking to notch their guns with your gizzard because you took in Midge Lawrence."

Drake's voice was sharp. "You seem to know a lot for a man who took to the tules."

"I keep in touch," said Colorado. He leaned back slightly, shoving his hat back on his head so the light caught meagerly in his pale eyes. "I've been meaning to contact

you anyway, Drake. I guess this is just luck, isn't it? As I say, I keep in touch. I know quite a bit about this business. Thomas Binder, for instance." He laughed flatly as he saw what that had done to Drake. "Surprised? I told you I know quite a bit. Maybe some of it would interest you, Drake. Why, for instance, do you figure Pacific Railroads has pegged you as the owner of Apache Gap? You know you don't own it. I know. But P. R. thinks you do."

Drake moved through a cut in the uplift toward Colorado, tightening his grip on the Winchester involuntarily. "How do you know I don't own the Gap? Because you know who does own it?"

"Maybe." Colorado's slack-lipped grin irritated Drake, as it had always done. "Maybe I know a lot of things you'd like to know, Drake. It puts you in quite a spot, doesn't it, having P. R. figure you own the Gap and won't sell it to them. You saw Binder, you know what kind he is. He's got all the power of a big corporation behind him when he moves, and the methods he might use to get what he thinks you own wouldn't be nice. They could even reach the point of endangering your life, Drake. And whatever affects you, now, affects Midge. That would put her between the frying pan and the fire, wouldn't it? Gerder coming at you from one side and Binder from the other—"

"Colorado—" Drake had been goaded so long by evasions and mysteries that he forgot his rifle, unable to take it from Colorado any longer, dropping the Winchester and shouting as he leaped, all the bitter frustration of the past days erupting in him—"what do you know, what do you know? Is this all mixed in together? Is Gerder after Midge for the same thing? Tell me, by God, or I'll kill you right here!"

Perhaps Colorado hadn't realized how near Drake was to this, for he didn't even get his gun up before Drake struck him, and he had gone backward with the gambler's hands on his throat, sliding down between Drake's legs till Drake stood bent over, straddling him, shaking him.

"Drake!" Colorado tried for an instant to jam his rifle upward, but released it in a spasm of agony to claw at Drake's hands on his throat, choking the words out. "Drake, stop it. Kill me and you're killing the girl!"

"Killing the girl?" Drake hardly recognized his own voice, but it was what made him quit. He stood spraddle-legged above the man, his hands still on Colorado's scrawny neck, panting heavily. Colorado tried to get his breath with a sick, hollow sound, his face contorted, and finally managed to force that slack-lipped smile back.

"Yeah," he breathed hoarsely. "I thought so. I thought maybe it was that way. You think some of Midge? I don't blame you. She's a nice little package—"

Drake was shaking him again, voice savage. "Shut up, shut up. Tell me what you meant about killing her."

Colorado licked his lips. "Let me up—"

"No, tell me—"

"Let me up or you don't get a crumb!"

DRAKE was trembling with his effort at control; he twisted around so he could see Midge. She had kicked away Carnes' Springfield and was holding the Winchester tightly, and sight of her standing so tensely there, her face set, backing him up, made Drake draw his hands off Colorado's neck and step back. The lean man rolled over to an elbow, then rose, brushing at his clothes, one hand holding his neck.

"You always did have strong fingers," he muttered sullenly. He tilted his head down to look at Drake from under his brows, and something sly came into his fuliginous eyes. "I shouldn't tell you anything after that."

"Colorado—"

"Never mind, never mind—" Colorado held up a defensive hand as Drake bent forward—"you'll get it, but you'll pay for it, believe me. That little business will cost you extra. Like I said, if anything happens to me, that's just as good as killing Midge. I'm the only one who can tell you what they're after, Drake, and where it is."

"What who's after?" Drake's voice held a desperation.

"Gerder," said Colorado "The P. R. Maybe even more have guessed about it now—Hazard or Petrie, or any one of a dozen who've been mixed up with Face Card and the rest of Tucson's dirty politics. Gerder wanted it bad enough to try and kill you in your own house to get Midge. You can drive Thomas Binder to the same extremes, or worse, if he keeps thinking

money won't buy the Gap from you. You know as well as I do what will eventually happen if you can't stop them, Drake. You can't buck them all forever; you're one against a dozen, and it'll be more all the time. Sooner or later one of them will get you. It doesn't matter whether it's Gerder or Binder or Hazard. It doesn't matter who it is. And then what will happen to Midge?" He took a hasty step backward at the savage look which crossed Drake's face. "I'm just telling you, Drake. You wanted it. I'm telling you. You know it yourself. That's the way it'll be, sooner or later, unless you can stop them."

"And you possess what it takes?"

"Not personally," said Colorado. "But maybe I can get my hands on it."

"On what?"

"On what they're all after."

"The Gap?"

Colorado's grin was condescending. "You see what a helpless position you're in, Drake. No, not exactly the Gap."

"Then Gerder's after something different than Binder."

"Is he?" said Colorado.

"Binder's after the Gap?"

"I didn't say he wasn't," said Colorado. "All I'm saying is what I can get my hands on isn't exactly the Gap, but it's what they're after."

"How will it stop them trying to get Midge?"

"Aren't you interested in yourself?"

"How will it stop them trying to get her?"

Colorado shrugged. "You'll find that out when you get it."

Drake was filled with a frustrated confusion, and he had to hold himself from going for Colorado again. "I suppose there's a consideration."

"Ten thousand dollars might help."

"You dirty liar—" Drake had him by the throat again— "you damn dirty liar. You don't have anything. Why should you take ten thousand from me when Binder's willing to lay twenty thousand across the board?"

"Drake, I told you," choked Colorado. "Take your hands off me or you won't get anything and you'll be just the same as putting the gun to Midge's head yourself." He almost fell when Drake released him, stumbling backward. He stood there, trying to get his breath again, and this time he didn't grin that way. "Okay. It's fifteen thousand now. For that, it's fifteen thousand." He saw the suspicion in Drake's smoldering black eyes and waved his thin hand. "Maybe I can't deal with Binder the way you can. Ever think of that? Why do you think he came to you in the first place? Do you think I wouldn't have sold it to him if I could?"

Drake's fists were opening and closing spasmodically. "What's the layout?"

"You know that old trapper's shack on Cochise Ridge above the Gap?" Drake shook his head, and Colorado turned momentarily to Midge. "You do, don't you, kid? Sure. Almost on the border of that strip your dad used to own on the other side of the ridge. I'll be there three days from now at dawn. That'll give you a chance to travel at night so nobody can spot you. Get it? Dawn, Tuesday next. You and Midge and fifteen thousand. Nothing else, nobody else. Try to pull a card from beneath your deck and you'll only be hurting Midge."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"Either take that chance, or—" he turned his hand palm up, gesturing significantly enough toward Midge, and shrugging. Then the slack-lipped grin came again. "Is it a deal?"

Drake's voice was flat. "It is. But if you're lying to me, Colorado, I'll kill you."

The utter simplicity of the statement might have been what gave it such a deadliness, or the look in Drake's eyes. Colorado Carnes stopped grinning. He looked at Drake a moment, and his face had an odd, pale light. He took a breath.

"Okay," he said, still held by Drake's gaze. Then he turned to get his rifle. "Okay. Tuesday next. With fifteen thousand."

Midge stepped aside from where he had thrown the Springfield, still holding the Winchester on him; bending to get his rifle, he looked up at her and attempted a smile, but it wouldn't seem to come, and in a sudden impatient way he picked up the bolt-action, cast a last, furtive glance at Drake, then turned to swing off across the meadow in a long stiff stride.

"I wonder if I've made a mistake," muttered Drake, watching him go.

"I think Face Card Farrow was the one who made the mistake," said Midge soberly.

His dark head turned down to her. "What do you mean?"

"He should have chosen you, instead of Colorado Carnes, for his bodyguard," she said.

VII

THE red flames crackled softly in the big rock fireplace of the Double Deuces house, and Etienne came through the kitchen door proudly bearing aloft a shining tureen, his chef's hat standing starched on his fat head and the sweat dribbling down the creases in his plump cheeks formed by a very satisfied smile.

"A special dinner to celebrate our safe arrival at the home spread with the cattle," he beamed. "Coulis de Lepereau au Currie. It is different from Filets de Levraut a la Mornay in that with Coulis de Lepereau the legs of the hare are used, compre, and in Levraut a la Mornay it is the loins and tenderloins. This is a much more complicated procedure, however. I spent twenty minutes rubbing the cullis through a sieve. In Filets of Hare Mornay there is none of that. Just take the filets of two leverets, compre, two young hares—"

"Set it down, will you, before it gets cold," smiled Drake.

The tureen made an offended thud on the ponderous oak table, and Etienne pouted. "Mon ami, you never let me finish telling you how I cook Filets de Levraut a la Mornay. You wouldn't even let me finish telling M'sieu Pacific Railroads in the Coronado House the other day. I had just gotten to where I color the croutons with butter when you walk out on the porch with that shotgun and I had to follow. He seemed so interested, too—"

"Shall I serve while you tell us how to cook Filets of rabbits?" laughed Midge.

"Hare, hare," muttered Etienne peevishly, "not rabbit, *sacre bleu,*" and waddled into the kitchen for rice a l'Indienne to garnish the cullis.

Midge went on talking as she served, telling Drake something about Waco and the herds.

It was odd, Drake reflected, how Midge seemed to be the one who kept the conversation going, leading them into jokes without their realizing it till they were laughing. Perhaps she sensed Drake didn't want to discuss Gerder or Hazard or Colorado—she seemed to sense so many of his moods—or perhaps she realized any talk of that would have depressed them and ruined what Etienne had intended should be a gay supper party. And surprisingly enough, before they had finished with the entree, Drake had forgotten Colorado and the rest. He had already sent Simms into Tucson with a draft on the bank for the fifteen thousand, which halved his balance, and all during this Sunday he had been pondering the day after tomorrow, when they should meet Colorado; but now, under Midge's gay banter, it had left him momentarily. He found himself watching the way she tilted her head to one side when she was listening to Etienne tell of his Paris, and found himself liking it, and the infinite variation of expression in her eyes that came when she was talking, and the strange little half-smile that caught at her lips when she realized he was watching her . . .

Etienne had found something to do in the kitchen after supper which left them alone in the living room, but he must have heard Midge retire about eleven, for a few minutes later the kitchen door creaked open. Drake was sitting in the big Spanish armchair before the fire, pleasantly drowsy.

"She read to you some more," said Etienne.

Drake glanced at the book, still open on the bear rug of the hearth. "She finds it strange for a gambler to enjoy Browning."

"She finds many things strange about you, as others before her have, *mon ami,*" said Etienne. "She finds it strange that you didn't kill Hazard when he provoked you to."

Drake knocked dottle from his cold pipe, shrugging. "She'd just been listening to her father or someone." Etienne smiled. "She also finds it strange that you haven't got a dead pan, and don't constantly play with a deck of cards, and don't affect the expected bored cynicism—"

"Don't, Villy, will you." Drake shook his head from side to side.

"Why not? Are you afraid to discuss how she feels about you?" Etienne bent to pick up the book. "She finds it strange that you enjoy Browning, yet she seems to enjoy

him, too. She seems to enjoy a lot of things you do. It has been pleasant, having her here, Drake. Will you be as sorry when this mess is over and she goes as I will be? It's almost been worth fighting all of Tucson to have her around."

"Don't be a fool." Drake's voice was impatient despite himself. "I'll find her a proper guardian as soon as she's out of danger. We can't keep her here like this any longer than is necessary."

"Why not, Drake?" Etienne was serious now. "Why not keep her here always. Don't you know how she feels about you?"

DRAKE got out of the chair, pacing restlessly toward the end of the room. "I said don't be a fool. I've just helped her. Naturally she feels some gratitude."

"Not gratitude, Drake. You know what it is. You've seen it. You just don't want to admit it to yourself."

Drake whirled on him, jerking his hand in that frustrated way. "She's just a kid. How does she know how she feels."

"She's a woman, Drake. Could a kid have gone through all this hell the way she has? Non. You just keep trying to tell yourself she's a kid because you're afraid to lower that barrier between the two of you. I've seen the way you watch her, Drake. You never watched Donna that way."

"But I'm thirty-five, and she's only nineteen—" Drake stopped, realizing that in itself was an admission of his feelings, and he saw how Etienne was smiling.

"Don't try to tell me you are that conventional, Drake," the Frenchman giggled. "Wasn't it the Brownings who had ten years' difference in their ages? How can you possibly read his works? I'm surprised he wasn't excommunicated—"

"Oh, stop it, stop it—"

Drake turned to the fire, hearing Etienne put the book away in the case at one end of the stone fireplace. He felt like a fool, but he knew Etienne had taken no offense, and when the Frenchman spoke again, it was cheerful enough.

"You've been looking over those papers of Farrow's, hein? Found anything?"

"Nothing I can really use," said Drake dispiritedly. "There is part of a letter that might help against Hazard. It's from Gerder to Hazard. I don't know how Farrow got hold of it; he had a genius for that sort of thing. No date on the letter, but in it, Gerder says his mouth is shut about the Corral Street fire as long as Hazard doesn't try to squeeze him out of his spread."

"*Oui,*" said Etienne. "Gerder picked up his Pothook spread about that time. A couple of months after the fire, wasn't it? I remember we all wondered why Hazard allowed Gerder to do it. The Pothook gave Gerder access to those sinks on Hazard's southern pastures, and Hazard had never let any other man use his water before. But what could Gerder know about the Corral Street fire that would give him a hold over Hazard?"

"Who was burned out in the fire?" said Drake. "Eddie Neiman's general store was gutted. The old Maxeter Grain and Feed Barns—"

"Maxeter could have been the one blocking Hazard's appointment to the chairmanship of the Tucson Cattlemen's Association," Etienne muttered. "Remember how hard Hazard was fighting to get the appointment. And Maxeter rode a big saddle in the T. C. A."

"And right after the fire, Maxeter resigned from the T. C. A.," said Drake. "He said the fire had ruined him."

"And Hazard is now chairman," grinned Etienne—then he shrugged. "But all this is mere supposition, Drake. You can't prove anything by that letter. Maybe Gerder *could* prove the fire was Hazard's doing, but you can't."

"I'll use it somehow—" began Drake, but someone was running across the flagstones of the porch, and he made a half-move toward his Knuckle Duster as the door was flung open. Waco Simms burst in, his lean face flushed from running.

"Hazard," he panted. "Big bunch coming up the road. Already at the fence. Hazard and Gerder. They mean business, Drake."

Drake had already whirled to get the Winchester down from the mantel, slipping it out of its scabbard and dropping the leather case, scooping off a cardboard box of thirty-thirties. "Get Midge dressed, Etienne. Don't let her outside. Waco?"

Waco Simms followed Drake onto the porch, closing the door behind them so the light wouldn't silhouette them to form tar-

gets. Drake could already feel the ground trembling faintly to the beat of many horses as he stepped onto the flagstones set into the earth, flush with the level of the surrounding compound. A support of the portales drew its dark line from the flagstones to the overhang above, forming a frame for the dark mass of riders as they poured around the end of the spur ridge that hid the fence from here and came on down the white ribbon of the roadway beneath the moonlight. One rider was head, his gun cracking out above the sound of hoofs. He hauled his lathered mount up at the edge of the porch, throwing himself off with one hand gripping his shoulder, stumbled toward Drake.

"They got Andy," he said. "We tried to hold them at the fence, but they got Andy."

"Get inside with that shoulder," said Drake, and then stepped from beneath the portale so the moonlight caught his white shirt brightly. He made a tall, broad-shouldered figure there, his legs straight and long beneath him, the Winchester drawing its significant line slantwise across the front of his flat belly. They saw him, and there was a perceptible diminution of their speed, and then the first man drew his horse to a halt, and the others slowed down as they passed him of their own momentum, halting one by one as they spread beyond him across in front of the house.

Drake could see how big the mare was, as it pulled away from the others, before he recognized the man.

"Little different than going through a fence, I guess," said Waco Simms bitterly, and Drake knew he was thinking of the boy named Andy.

"Drake?" said the man on the big Apaloosa mare.

"You know it is, Hazard," said Drake. "We came for the girl."

"Listen, Hazard." Something hoarse had entered Drake's voice. "She hasn't got it. Whatever you're after, she hasn't got it."

"Whatever I'm after?" Hazard's Apaloosa shifted restlessly. "All I'm after is Midge. She's my ward, and I'm not having her out here in any damn gambler's house like this."

"Don't deal me those deuces," said Drake. "You aren't after her because she's your ward. You don't care about that, you never did. Gerder's with you? You're after the same thing he is."

IT WAS Gerder, then, gigging his dappled gelding in beside Hazard, taller than the other man, smaller about the waist. "You'd better hand her over, Drake. We aren't going away without her this time. We've got the law with us now, and whatever we do is legal."

"George?" said Drake.

It was a long moment before Sheriff George Kennedy reluctantly answered, unwilling to move his horse out of the line behind Hazard and Gerder. "Yeah, Drake. He's right. Please don't cause us any trouble. I got a warrant here for you for Midge's abduction."

"Who swore it out?"

Again the answer was late in coming. "Petrie."

The bitterness inside him entered Drake's voice now. "I'm glad all my friends are in on this. I'm glad you didn't leave any of them out, George. Good for you. I won't forget this, George. No matter what happens, I won't forget it."

"Drake, please—"

"You don't care what they're after, do you, George? You know as well as I do Hazard isn't after Midge because she's his ward. You know that, don't you?" But Drake saw how it was now, with that many of them out there, and under his breath he spoke to Waco Simms. "Get Midge out the back and into that timber north of the house. I'll hold them here till you're free. It's the best we can do now." Then he raised his voice again. "I'm not handing her over, George. You hear that? Hazard? I'm not handing her over. You'll pay higher stakes for this than you ever did at my poker games. Hurry up, Waco, they're starting to spread. Hurry before they get around back. Waco, damn you—"

Simms had been reluctant to leave Drake alone there, but finally he slipped through the door. Gerder must have seen the momentary spread of light behind Drake, for his voice came hard across the space between them.

"They're doing something. Get your men around the house, Hazard, they're doing something in there."

It was Drake's last effort to stop them,

and his voice was strained. "All right, Hazard, you forced it. You've got your boots in the mud too deep to pull them out now. Can you hear me, Hazard? Maybe you didn't know what I got in town the other day. Gerder knows. Or maybe you came after that, too. Well, you won't get it, Hazard. Face Card Farrow's papers are in the hands of the marshal at Prescott right now, in a sealed envelope to be opened on my death. Do you hear me?"

They had heard him. He hadn't expected such a reaction. The movement out there stopped. A horse shifted, snorting restlessly, and for a moment that was the only sound. Then Hazard called to Drake and it sounded forced.

"What have Face Card's papers got to do with this?"

Drake felt the first flush of hope. "You know what they've got to do with it. There's a lot of people in Tucson would like to know who was responsible for the Corral Street fire, Hazard."

"What's that?" said Hazard. "Drake, you're crazy—"

"Am I? Face Card Farrow had a number of interesting documents among his papers, Hazard. Make them public and half the men in Tucson would have to leave the country. Even a few honest, law-abiding citizens. Maybe the T. C. A. would be interested in finding the measures their present chairman took to get his appointment."

"You're bluffing." There was something shrill in Hazard's tone.

"Am I? Go ahead with this then, and find out. Go ahead, Hazard. You're dealing now. You can put any cards you want in your hand."

He could see Hazard turn sharply to Gerder, and they had begun arguing. Hazard waved his arm, saying something to Gerder. Gerder shifted angrily in his saddle, answering. Hazard turned to look at the house once more, then jerked his head in a sharp, mandatory way, wheeling his Apaloosa savagely and spurring it into a sharp canter down the road. Half a dozen riders broke from the line behind to follow him, and Drake knew they would be the Lazy Hook crew. A last man turned his horse to follow Hazard.

"George," said Gerder loudly enough for Drake to hear.

Sheriff Kennedy hesitated, then stopped his horse, sitting there in a sullen slouch. There were seven or eight men left beside the sheriff that Drake could see, and Gerder said something that started them spreading. A pair of them dismounted, hitching their horses in the cottonwoods across the road and moving at an angle that would take them to the side of the house.

"Gerder," shouted Drake in a final desperation, "haven't you got any feeling for the kid at all She's just as liable to get hurt as any of us. Start shooting and you can't tell who you're liable to pin. Killing her won't get what you want—"

THE first shot cut him off, the slug singing lengthwise down the porch. The heavy portale would provide no protection from this angle, and he whirled toward one end, snapping a shot at the dim blur of movement out in the shadows at the side of the house. One of Gerder's men had gained a position down there, and he ducked behind a wheelbarrow in the yard, firing again. Drake leaped for the door.

He shoved against it and hurtled inside, catching at the inside knob to keep from falling, slamming it shut. Then he saw Midge, crouched against the couch, her face pale and tear-streaked. Simms turned from where he had his hands on her shoulders.

"She wouldn't go," he panted, and blood was leaking from a scratch above his eye. "Fought like a wildcat—"

"Drake." She had risen to her feet, stumbling past Simms, and was in Drake's arms, sobbing against his chest. "I wouldn't go without you, I couldn't, don't make me, please don't make me—"

"It's too late now anyway," he muttered, feeling a momentary anger, "they're around back," and then the anger was gone, because he couldn't feel that way, with her, and he tried to make his smile reassuring, holding her away so she could see it. "That's all right, honey. They aren't getting you, understand, I'm here and they aren't getting you."

The thunder of Etienne's gun filled the room suddenly, from where he had been crouched at one of the slot-like windows, and he spat through the opening. "Paillard. That will teach you to try and sneak down my porch. A twenty-eight gauge on the bot-

tom and a thirty-eight caliber on the top, and all you have to do is tell me which one you want."

His Le Mat pounded again, and Drake sprawled across the couch beneath the other window, throwing his words over one shoulder to Waco. "Get to the back. If you need help, yell."

Simms helped his wounded boy through the kitchen door, and that would be two of them back there. Out the window, Drake could see the huddled form of the man Villeneu had shot trying to cross the porch. Drake became aware that it had gotten darker in the room, and he twisted around to see Midge turning down the last oil-lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Then he sensed her moving toward him, and she knelt on the floor beneath where he was half-lying on the couch. Her small hand settled onto his back, warm and soft, giving him confidence, somehow, and it made him smile, because he had been trying to think of something to say that would comfort her, and he realized it had been she who had comforted him. There was some movement in the cottonwoods, and then a group of men broke from the trees farther up the road out of range, moving toward the barn. They disappeared behind the barn, and after that a silence settled down.

"Simms, everything all right back there?" called Drake softly.

"Yeah," said Simms. "What they up to?"

"Don't know. They muffed a try at rushing us from the front. Etienne got one of them for your boy at the fence."

"Thanks," said Waco. "I hope I get the same chance. It sure is quiet out there. Gerder's up to something. You want to watch it, Drake."

Drake realized he was perspiring. It wasn't particularly warm. Waiting? That was probably it. Waiting for what? He found his hand aching from the force of his grip on the Winchester, and tried to relax it. Midge shifted against him, and he could hear her breathing. Etienne moved restlessly on the other side of the door.

"Sacre, why don't they do something? It makes me more nervous than watching a Yankee try to eat Macaroni a la Napolitaine."

Drake shifted farther forward on the couch. The moonlight lay bright across the compound. The Tanque Verdes rose somberly above the sweep of meadow, silent, waiting. Everything seemed to be waiting. Drake saw the blueroot north of the house flutter faintly in a rising breeze; then even that stopped. He licked his lips. Midge must have risen enough to look over his shoulder and see it about the same time he did, for she took that last breath sharply.

"Drake, it's piled with hay."

THEY had wheeled his linchpin wagon from the barn, dripping with the hay Simms had hauled in from Tucson for feed. They had a pair of Drake's heavier horses in the harness. As if it had struck both of them at once. Drake turned and found Etienne looking at him.

"They can't," he said, "not an adobe house. It won't work."

"Your portale isn't adobe," said Etienne. "And neither is your roof. If it strikes the front here, the wood of the overhang will carry it right into the roof proper, and *voila—*" he threw a kiss at the ceiling—"finis."

"Drake!" Midge's voice held all the terror of sudden realization. "You mean they're going to smoke us out?"

"They're already doing it," he said, nodding toward the wagon. The first flames had begun to lick up the pile of hay in the bed, and a man was mounting the front seat. He got the horses going, turning them toward the house, and when they were breaking from their trot into a gallop, jumped off. Several other riders were on either side of the team, shooting into the air and lashing at them with quirts, but it was the fire that finally completed the job, sending the team into a frenzied run as they felt the heat on their rumps and heard the crackling flames. Drake levered his .30-30. "Try to down those Morgans before they reach the house. Never mind the men. It's our only chance. Get back, Midge. Hit this front wall and they're liable to cave the whole thing in—"

His shots drowned his voice, and the riders dropped away from the running team to let it go on, the flaming linchpin careening behind, swaying from one side to the other and trailing burning hay in its path. The pair of Morgans was silhouetted against the fire, and Drake saw one of them leap

up in its run as his third bullet struck. But it didn't down the animal. The horse kept stumbling along, trying to tear free of the harness, pulled on by its frenzied mate. Drake could hear Etienne's Le Mat bellowing, and he snapped home his lever for the last desperate time, firing again at the wounded horse. He heard the animal scream again, and saw it fall against the other Morgan, and then go down. But the other horse couldn't stop, and the uneven pull swung the wagon around.

"Drake," screamed Midge, pulling him back off the couch, "Drake!" and he stumbled and fell on top of her as the back end of the wagon completed its half circle and smashed into the suporte in front of the window Drake had been using. The suporte collapsed beneath the driving weight of the loaded wagon, and the tail-gate smashed on in under the portale, thundering into the adobe wall with a force that shook the whole house. Flaming hay showered in through the window, and the wall sagged inward, ripped by a network of deep cracks.

Drake leaped forward, trying to beat the fire out before it caught on the harateen covering of the couch, but the blaze above had already started, the spruce frame of the portale catching immediately. The ceilings of these adobes were formed of interlaced boughs laid across the viga poles forming the rafters, with earth piled on top of that; the boughs were woven so closely that no dirt seeped through, and all that was needed to seal it from winter rain was a succeeding layer of adobe plastered on top of the earth each spring. But already the spruce of the porch's overhang was burning, and flames licked in through the walls, climbing down the inner vigas.

"We can't stop it now," shouted Drake above the crackling flames. "This is what Gerder wanted. We'll go out the window, on the west side of the kitchen; that's the shortest run to the timber."

He caught Midge around the waist with one arm, pulling her toward the kitchen door. The roof was already covered with greedy lanes of red fire, and a flaming bough disengaged itself from the interlacing sections, burned off at one end, dropping across Drake's shoulders. With a strangled little cry, Midge tore it from him, beating his smoking shirt with her small hands. Drake pushed her on through the kitchen door, turning to see Etienne charging across the front room as one of the hanging blankets went up in flames and fell across the heavy pier table at this end of the room. The whole front wall back of the couch was a mass of flames now, and a viga pole crashed down behind the Frenchman as he reached the kitchen.

"They're waiting out there," he gasped. "All around, Drake!"

"Take this," said Drake, shoving his Knuckle Duster into Midge's hand. "My father used it when he worked the boats on the Missouri. I guess you know what to do with it."

"Was your father a gambler, too?" she said. Then she looked up, and there was near hysteria in her giggle. "That's a silly thing to ask at a time like this, isn't it?"

"All right, all right," he told her, taking hold of her elbow. "We're going to get out of this, understand."

"I'm not afraid, Drake," she said, and the hysteria was gone.

Drake looked toward Simms, crouching at the slotlike kitchen window. "How is it?"

"GERDER'S out there with maybe half a dozen," said Waco, licking his lips. "Most of them behind the bunk-shack. One or two in that ditch you been irrigating your corn with. They must be crazy. They must know they're just as liable to hit the girl as—"

"Shut up," snapped Drake.

"Never mind, Drake," said Midge. "I know how it is."

Another viga crashed down behind them in the front room, and the roaring of the blaze forced Etienne to raise his voice. "If we're going, we better start right now, Drake. That fire'll reach the kitchen in another moment."

Drake looked at Waco, and the lean foreman nodded. "You with the girl. I'll take it first. Then Jiner here. How about it, Ji?"

The wounded man nodded grimly, hugging his shoulder with the same hand in which he held his six-shooter. Waco broke his gun, spun the cylinder, then snapped it shut. He had his free hand on the window sill when someone shouted from outside.

"What are they saying?"

"Gerder," said Waco. "He says you can

come out with your hands up and empty, and they won't shoot."

Drake met his eyes. "You aren't in this, really, Simms. Why don't you put your gun on the kitchen table?"

A disgusted look entered Waco's acrid face, and he spat, and crawled through the window, and his gun began banging from outside. Grimacing with pain, Jiner let Etienne help him through, and then it was his weapon going too. Drake took one last look at Midge, and his lips worked across his teeth in a lopsided grin, and he turned to crawl across the thick sill. Bullets were thudding into the adobe as he dropped outside, and he stood with his back against the opening, closing it off till he felt Midge's head against him. Jiner and Simms had thrown themselves prone on the ground and were firing steadily at the cottonwoods, and it was the only thing that saved Drake from being riddled against the wall of the building. Unwilling to face the hail of lead Jiner and Waco were throwing, Gerder's men kept to the cover of the trees. But as Drake moved forward to let Midge drop out behind him, still shielding her with his body, he saw the shadowy movement in the irrigation ditch. His lever made a sharp, metallic click, and the Winchester bucked against the hip. At the same time, he saw the man's gun flame, and his head jerked back to a terrific blow on his neck, and the blood pulsed hot beneath his shirt.

The moonlit landscape spun before him, and Midge's arms were around his body, keeping him from falling back. He could see again by the time Etienne had gotten through the window, and the man made a crumpled blot across the heaped earth banking the irrigation ditch.

"All right?" said Waco, not looking around.

"All right," said Drake. "Make for the ditch. It leads past the cottonwoods almost to timber. I think I got one of the men in it."

He was already running forward when he realized only Waco had risen, and he faltered, looking at Jiner. Waco threw himself for the ditch, shouting hoarsely.

"Never mind, he got his packet, no use stopping."

The roll of gunfire was deafening now, and Drake dived for the ditch with Midge, spitting out mud and dirt and rolling to his knees in the shallow bottom. Waco was already crawling down the ditch, firing at the movement near the end. Drake saw the man, too, and pumped a shot at him. There was a loud splash, and the firing from up there stopped. They crawled through the water single file, passing the man Drake had shot from the house; he lay silently across the heap of earth banked above them. Then they came to the second man, face-down in the water, and he moaned softly as Drake crawled over him. From out in the cottonwoods, Gerder began to shout.

"Cut across the end of that ditch, Italy. They're trying to reach the timber. Throw your men between the end of that ditch and the trees."

"Gerder," shouted Waco hoarsely, and rose from the ditch ahead of Drake to fire. But his six-shooter only clonked on an empty chamber. Drake did not know whether he heard the shot first, or saw Waco jerk, silhouetted against the sky like that, or whether it came all at once. Waco bent over with a hollow cough and slid back into the ditch. By the time Drake reached the ramrod, Waco was sucking in air painfully. He tried to laugh, and blood clogged in his throat.

"I'll blow smoke out my shortribs every time I drag a fag, now, won't I, Drake? No, don't try to help. I'm done. I won't have to worry about fags. Just load my gun for me, will you? I'll get it empty again before I step on my last horse. Load my gun."

DRAKE could see how it was, and he thumbed the .44 shells from Waco's belt, getting the man's blood all over his hands, and punched out the empties in the big Peacemaker and stuffed in the fresh loads. Then he slipped it into the hand Waco had been holding across his chest, and that was wet with blood too.

"It was a good ride, Waco," said Drake, a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Get going, damn you," gasped Waco, and then crawled up the bank and deliberately stood erect, "here I am, Gerder, here I am, damn you, and there's one for Andy," and the roar of his Peacemaker drowned him out.

Drake had already dragged Midge on down the ditch, and he heard her sobbing,

and felt like it himself. They reached the end of the gully to see Italy's men moving in from the other side.

"My turn, mon ami," said Etienne, shoving by Drake, and had jumped out of the ditch before Drake had stopped him, opening fire with his Le Mat. Drake saw one of Italy's men fall sideways. The rest was a madness of roaring guns and shouting men and pounding feet. Drake knew abstractedly that Midge was yelling with the best of them and shooting the Knuckle Duster, and that his own Winchester was empty.

"*Sacre bleu!*" he heard Etienne shout once, and then he realized the first spruce trees were closing around them, and they were in the timber. He dropped a little behind Midge, panting, dizzy with the pain of his wound, reloading his Winchester from the box he had in his pocket. Etienne's boots thudded heavily through the timber behind them, and then made a soft padding sound as they struck the carpet of needles beneath the first pine. Drake quartered them on the slope instead of going directly up, so they could run faster. Suddenly Midge went to her knees in front of him.

"Can't go any farther, Drake," she panted, crying with utter exhaustion. "Can't run any more."

Drake picked her up in his arms, stumbling blindly on up the slope at an angle, rattling through some plum bushes. He didn't know when he became aware that there was no sound behind him. Turning, he couldn't see Etienne. Chest heaving, he moved blindly back downslope, trying to approximate the direction they had come in. Etienne had fallen in some gunweed. Drake set Midge down and pulled the Frenchman clear, turning him over on his back.

"I'll never forgive you for that, Villy."

Etienne smiled wanly. "I thought if I didn't call, you might not know it, and go on. You were a fool to come back. No, don't try to move me."

Drake remembered, then, that last time Etienne had yelled. "Gerder?"

"*Oui,* Gerder, I think. I was running like a jackrabbit, and I don't know for sure, but I think it was Gerder. Jackrabbit?" He raised up with a sudden violence, and Drake could see the delirium in him, with all that pain. He began to writhe from side to side in Drake's arms, his voice becoming a thick babble. "That reminds me, Laramie, I think I'll have Filets de Levraut a la Mornay tonight. Two young leverets, compre? Young hares, about—" he surged up against Drake, holding out fat hands to measure it, staring at them with wide glazed eyes—"about so big, hein? Oui. Filets of two leverets. Then prepare the same number of bread croutons as there are slices of the filet, compre, and the same number of sliced truffles." His breath was coming in hoarse, swift gasps now, and his head dropped back against Drake's arm as his babble became almost incoherent. "Oui, the same number of sliced . . . sliced truffles. Cook them in two cups Madeira, then add the filets and croutons, colored in clarified butter. Compre? After that add a little juicy pale glaze and sauce and sauted slices and serve it in a hot timbale. And voila! Filets of Young Hare . . . Young Hare . . . Mornay . . ." he lifted his head with a great effort, and for that last moment the delirium seemed to have left him, and there was only a faint, final surprise in his eyes. "Sacre bleu," he mumbled weakly, "you let me finish. . . ."

Midge had gotten to her knees beside them, and as Drake gently lowered the fat Frenchman back to the ground, she spoke in a strained whisper. "Drake, is he—?"

"Yes." Drake's face held a sick, gray color. "Villey has cooked his last rabbit."

VIII

WITH the first heat of morning sun, a ground-fog steamed out of the sodden earth, not yet dry from the rain of several days before, on these northern slopes, and the tall junipers dripped dew into the banners of milky haze swimming about their hoary feet. Drake's mind was a blank when he first awoke, except for a dim sensation of throbbing pain in his neck. His body was so stiff he could hardly move; then he felt the soft weight of a body against him, and it began to come back. They had been forced to leave the dead Etienne Villeneu unburied there on the footslopes, driven away by the oncoming

Gerder and his men. Carrying Midge half the time, Drake had managed to elude them finally, seeking the ridgetops above his Double Deuces valley. Lying there now on the soggy bed of needles where he had thrown himself when he could go no farther, the gambler gently shook Midge.

The same blankness he had felt was in her blue eyes, and then the memory, sweeping through and turning them wide and dark. She began to tremble against him, and he did not know whether that was reaction or cold.

"I've caused you so much trouble," she said, and began to cry softly. "Your friends in town, your house, Waco and Villey, everything you held dear—"

"I've still got something," he said, his fingers tightening on her arm. He could see the utter despair in her and knew this, if any, was the time to tell her. "I've got you, Midge. I don't know why I was afraid to face it before—the way I feel about you. I kept trying to tell myself you were a kid. I guess that's natural enough. I guess that's the way most men my age would react at first, when they began realizing how they felt about someone fifteen years younger than they were. Sort of a perverted defense against something they never met before, like that. But I'm through trying to say you're a kid. You're a woman. You've got all the maturity a man could ask. Villey seemed to know how you felt about me—"

"He *did,* Drake, he *did.*" Some of the despair had left her, and he saw the same look in her face which had been there when she was asking about Donna, and he knew why she had asked, now. It filled him again with that sense of holding something infinitely fragile, and he was almost afraid to breathe.

"What does age matter," she murmured. "There's no fifteen years' difference between our minds, Drake. There's no difference at all. They work alike and think alike and feel alike. We enjoy the same things, we hate the same things, we love the same things. . . ."

"Yes," he said, "we do," and her lips were sweeter than Donna's had ever been, or any other woman's, and it was different than Donna had been, somehow, or any other woman. Finally he got to his feet, helping her up.

"We aren't through yet, Midge. We'll still finish this fight holding high card." He patted his shirt. "I sent Simms into town after that fifteen thousand. I've been wearing it in a specie belt under my shirt ever since. We'll see Colorado Carnes on time!"

He had used up all this Winchester shells, and had been too weak to carry the useless rifle as well as Midge, but the girl had retained his Knuckle Duster, with three .41 shells still in it. He tried to use it for hunting something to eat, but his neck wound nauseated him so much he could hardly see. Finally Midge found some creosote bushes, and using one of the wind matches he carried to light his pipe, built a fire of dry cottonwood, heating the creosote leaves and forming a pulpy poultice which she tied onto his neck with her bandanna.

"It's an old Indian remedy," she told him. "You'll be surprised how much better you feel in a little while."

There was no outfit in the Tanque Verdes between Drake's Double Deuces and Apache Gap; the nearest privately owned land they could reach from the Double Deuces was the strip flanking Cochise Ridge which Hazard owned, but Hazard's house was miles south of that. Thus, without hope of horses, they set out to foot it all the way to the Gap, crossing the ridge above them and dropping down the other slope. They were nearing the bottom when Midge caught at Drake's arm, halting him with a hissing intonation.

AN OLD game trail cut through the black cottonwoods below them, and the riders had rattled the leaves on a low branch, passing by. Barton Gerder came first, on his dappled gelding, whey-bellied and big-rumped from the grain in Ansel's livery stable. Behind Gerder was Kirkboot, Hazard's big, ugly foreman. Then Italy, his black derby mashed in on one side, his left arm in a sling. Finally it was Sheriff George Kennedy, on a gaunt mare as glum and sour as himself. Drake and Midge stood rigid, motionless, not twenty feet from the riders as they passed. Just before he was out of sight, Gerder turned his black-hatted head to look up the ridge. Midge's hand tightened in Drake's but Gerder had been looking through a lane of trees to their right, toward the crest, and was gone before

he saw them.

"They look like they could use some sleep," said Drake. "I'll bet they've been riding all night, like this. Gerder's a clever man. He knew we'd have to come down from the toplands sooner or later. He's probably got some more men riding the ridge."

"They'll see us if we try to cross the valley." Midge's voice was tight.

"We'll never make the Gap on time if we wait here till night," said Drake. "Game?"

She drew in her lips, nodding her head. They crossed the game trail, seeking the thickest stands of timber. This western slope was in shadow, but as soon as they crossed the narrow valley and began to climb the opposite slope, the sunlight picked them out pitilessly as they moved upward through the fragrance of the pine, and before they had sighted timberline, Drake heard the first shout from the ridge across the valley, small and clear, significant enough. He could see the riders on the crest over there, and was high enough to see Gerder's movement on the lower slopes, a shadowy, glittering impression through the green pines. And as Drake and Midge topped their own ridge, they could see the riders crossing the valley and rising through the slopes beneath them. Just beyond the top, so they wouldn't be skylighted, Drake turned parallel to the crest; far ahead, now, he could see how this ridge melted into the sheer cliffs of the Gap. The girl knew more about trailing than Drake, and she showed him how they could cross shale without leaving tracks, and utilize fallen timber with the same success. Perhaps, not knowing they were heading toward the Gap, Gerder had expected them to keep on the same route and drop into the next valley, and had lost time looking for their trail to follow the slope down. At any rate, they reached afternoon without sighting him again, but the threat was always there, driving them when Drake would have liked to rest for Midge.

By dusk they were stumbling through the timber of the toplands near the Gap, stupid with exhaustion, their clothes and skin alike ripped by catclaw and serviceberry. They reached a small stream trickling down from a hidden source higher up, and Midge dropped to her belly to drink, and then lay there too weary for even the movement that would satisfy her gnawing thirst.

"We have to stop here," said Drake. "Gerder or not, we've got to rest a while," and was on his knees beside her, scooping the water up in his hand for her to drink.

He must have dozed, or sunk into a stupor, for the next consciousness he had was of an owl hooting mournfully from the timber above them, which stretched its dark pattern across a yellow moon. It was worse, trying to find their way by night through the tangled thickets covering the slopes to the escarpment above Apache Gap. Finally they topped Cochise Ridge, and squatting there in the chill, they could look down on the old shack tucked down in a hollow on the slope that ran into Hazard's Big Hook. There was an ancient corral in ruins behind the shack, but no sign of life.

"Funny," said Drake. "Colorado called it a trapper's cabin. I never heard of a trapper building a packpole corral like that. Looks big enough for a whole string of ponies."

His mind was not on that, however. It had been a trying journey, but there had been a goal to carry him along. Now that they were here, with so little time between them and the end, he felt an abrupt letdown, and for the first time, the doubts swept him. Would Colorado come? He had banked so much on this; it was their last hope, really. And if Colorado came, would what he brought solve all this?

As had happened so many times before, Midge seemed to sense his mood, and her hand slipped into the crook of his elbow, "Don't worry. I know you can't trust Colorado, but he'll be there. He isn't the kind to miss fifteen thousand dollars, for anything. And he must have something we can use. I don't think he'd have the nerve to try and pull a switch on you, Drake, to your face."

"Listen," he said, turning to her, and this was difficult for him. "Listen, there's no telling what will happen down there, or what's waiting, or what will come. You—"

"No, Drake." Her voice was sharp with a rising fear. "No. I've come this far. I'm in it as much as you. I'm not afraid as

long as I'm with you, Drake, but if you left me . . . up here. . . ."

He drew a heavy breath, muttering, "All right," and moved toward the cabin.

MOONLIGHT cast a deep pool of shadow beneath the west wall, enigmatic, mysterious. The silence threw its weight against Drake. His hand was sweating around the Knuckle Duster's engraved brass frame. He pulled his index finger from the trigger guard to release the sliding safety lock beneath the frame. Holding Midge's fingers with his other hand, he quartered down the hill, leaning against the slope. His boots knocked some shale loose, and its clatter was startling in the stillness. Colorado had told them dawn, but there was no telling when he would arrive. They walked tensely across the level before the cabin, the shadows reaching out greedily for them. Then Drake heard the groan from within, and it startled him into a sick nausea like a sudden blow in the groin. He had stopped so abruptly the girl brought up against him, and the two of them stood rigid, holding their breaths without knowing they did it.

"Colorado?" whispered Drake.

"Colorado?" The voice boomed from within the cabin like an echo. "That you? Come back here, damn you. You're out there, come back here and kill me. Least you can do that. Not going to lay here two-three days with this hole in my belly. Hear me? Come back and get it over quick, will you? Least you can do that. Damn you, Colorado, come back and kill me—"

"Binder!" Drake had recognized the strange, mechanical tones. "It's Drake, understand? It's Drake out here. I'm coming in. Don't do any shooting if you planned to. All right?"

"All right!" Binder's voice held a flat rage. "Hurry up, that's all."

Drake stumbled over an upturned stool near the door, saw Binder's legs sticking into a yellow beam of moonlight that slipped in a wide crack through the east wall. Drake almost went through a rotten place in the floor before he reached the man.

"How did you get here?" he said, going to his knees beside Binder. "Colorado shot you? He's been here?"

"Tell you if you put me out of my misery," grunted Binder. "Hell couldn't be any worse than this. Colorado contacted me in Tucson, told me to meet him here tonight with twenty thousand and he'd give me deed to land controlling the Gap."

"Sort of shuffling his cards fast," said Drake. "He made a date to meet me here tomorrow morning on the same deal though he didn't actually mention the deed."

"Probably planned on having me out of the way by the time you arrived," said Binder. "He had the deed all right. One of those old federal homestead patents issued under the territorial legislature."

"Then Colorado owns the Gap—"

"He doesn't own anything," said Binder peevishly. "He was a fool to think I'd buy the deed off him like that. When I refused, he put a load through my belly and took the money anyway."

"But if he doesn't own the Gap, who does?"

"You, Drake," said Colorado Carnes from the doorway. "You."

IX

HIS flat-topped hat held that cocky slant against the black silhouette of his thin head, Colorado, and the way he held one narrow shoulder tilted beneath the other told Drake which side he carried the heavy Springfield on.

"Don't move any more." Colorado laughed shortly. "That's it. I didn't expect you so early, Drake. I thought I'd have our P. R. friend out of the way by the time you came. When Binder saw the deed, he tried to get cagey. I don't like cagey characters. A Springfield .30 makes a nice hole through a man's belly. I'd just gotten the money off him when I heard your horse nicker down in the Gap. Those canyon walls throw an echo you can hear a mile off. I couldn't hide Binder; he was still alive, and he might have groaned or something, and I couldn't shoot him again for fear you'd hear the shot. I went out to try and meet you before you hit the shack. I found your horses down off Cochise Ridge. You must have taken a different route than I did?"

Drake sensed Midge stiffening beside him. "But we didn't—"

"What did you mean the deed was mine, Colorado?" said Drake swiftly. Horses down off the ridge? That was the only chance they had, now. "I never owned land here."

"Face Card Farrow had no living relative, and your partnership with him wasn't dissolved legally at the time of his death, consequently you now possess Face Card's estate," said Colorado. "Part of said estate is the deed; it was among his papers."

"You were the one who killed him," said Drake.

"In a little argument over back salary. Face Card had been sorting his papers, and I thought I might as well sweep it clean. You should have seen the stuff I got, Drake. Enough to hang half the men in Tucson. The deed had belonged to Midge's father, Edward Lawrence. Lawrence came here in '70 and staked his homestead on Cochise Ridge; the quarter section runs right down off the ridge and crosses the bottom of Apache Gap, controlling the eastern entrance to the Gap. This shack isn't a trapper's cabin like everybody has gotten to think; it's Edward Lawrence's original home."

"That's why Gerder was after Midge," said Drake. "He thought Midge had the deed."

"Yes." Something tense was entering Colorado's voice, and he leaned forward as if to peer at Drake's face. "Lawrence moved from here before Midge was born, and I guess she, like everyone else, thought her dad sold this quarter section to Hazard along with the rest of Cochise Ridge. That's why she didn't know what Gerder wanted off her. Gerder was Lawrence's ramrod at the time, and he was the only one who knew Lawrence kept the original homestead site. But what Gerder didn't know, when he found out the P. R. would pay twenty thousand for that site, was that Lawrence had signed it over to Face Card Farrow for a gambling debt. Now give me that money you brought, Drake."

Drake was staring past Colorado, trying to see any movement out there, now. "How did you figure the Gap came into my hands, Binder?"

Perhaps Binder sensed the game, for his answer came deliberately. "Face Card Farrow had already approached P. R. about selling the Gap, but by the time I arrived in Tucson, he was dead. As his partner, I knew the deed would go to you if he'd possessed it."

"And Farrow had you kill Edward Lawrence," Drake told Colorado.

"I'm warning you, Drake," said Carnes. "If you don't give me that money I'll shoot you right here on your knees. I don't know what you're stalling for, but if you—"

"Face Card knew that whoever possessed that deed was in a dangerous position. The Tucson Cattlemen's Association would just about commit murder to keep that deed from falling into the hands of P. R." The sweat was dripping into Drake's eyes now, as he saw the strained line come into Colorado's long body. "So in order to keep his acquisition of the deed secret, Face Card had you kill Lawrence that night after Lawrence had left the Colorado House."

Binder was playing along with Drake now. "It's funny you didn't know all this before, Drake, as Face Card's partner."

"I didn't handle the table Lawrence played at that night," said Drake. "And I left Face Card's politics strictly alone."

"Drake—"

"All right, Colorado." There was something final about Drake's voice. "I'm through stalling. You stacked your cards too close together; they're knocking each other down now. As Midge started to tell you, we didn't come on horses tonight. Those were Barton Gerder's horses you found off the Ridge. And that's Barton Gerder coming over the ridge behind you."

"Don't try to pull that old one on me, Drake," said Colorado.

Gerder must have thought it was Drake standing in the doorway, because he had come over the ridgetop and down the slope and was within easy range now, just past the corral, when he called. "Just keep standing right there in the door, Drake, and drop whatever you have in your hands."

COLORADO stiffened, then twisted around, shouting, "It's me, Bart, not—" and then the deafening smash of guns cut him off, and the hail of lead literally carried him halfway across the room. His body dropped heavily across Drake's and Midge's, where Drake had thrown himself against the girl, knocking her sprawling

on the floor. After the rolling echoes had died, they could hear Gerder's voice.

"You'd better come out now, Midge. Drake was a damn fool to try it that way. We don't want you to get hurt."

"They won't shoot you, Midge, they want you alive," said Drake, trying to fish the Springfield out from beneath Colorado's bloody body without sound. "But there's no telling what they'll pull when they find out that they didn't get me. Sooner or later they'll find out, and sooner or later they'll force us out of here. We might as well make the first move. Tell them you're coming out, and not to shoot."

She hesitated a moment, staring at him, then spoke in a strained voice. "I'm coming out, Gerder. Don't shoot . . ."

He shoved the Knuckle Duster into her hand, and rose with Colorado's Springfield and the man's cartridge belt unbuckled from around his waist. He drew a deep breath, then moved straight toward the doorway.

"Stay here, no matter what happens," he hissed. "It's our last draw. Now tell him not to shoot again."

"Don't shoot, Gerder, I'm coming—"

Drake was out the doorway into the moonlight then, and he had taken his one step toward the corral raising its dilapidated skeleton to one side of the house before someone up on the slope across the compound shouted:

"Hey, that's not Midge, that's a man!"

The surprise of it held them an instant more, and Drake had already thrown himself bodily toward the corral posts before they opened fire. He rolled across the open compound with slugs thudding into the earth all about him and brought up hard against a pile of grass-topped sod that had built up along the broken fence through the years. Then he was sprawled on his belly behind the sagging corral with the Springfield across the bottom bar and over his sights he could see two of them exposed on the slope, trying to scramble back up to the cover of the ridge. He swung the rifle till the bulk of one man was square across his front button, and it bucked up hard against his face, and he saw the man spread-eagled in the air for that moment, and then fall over backward and roll down the slope. Drake snapped the bolt open, the hot shell popping out, and had already thumbed a fresh .30 from the belt. But before he had it in the breech, the second man had topped the ridge, silhouetted there for one maddening moment while Drake snapped shut the bolt and tried to raise the gun all in one movement, and then had dropped back on the other side before Drake could fire.

It didn't matter much. They knew he was alive, now, and out of the cabin, and whatever they did, they wouldn't be shooting at the cabin, and Midge was safe there.

"Kill me, damn you," shouted Binder from within the shack suddenly. "Drake, come back here and kill me!"

"That you, Drake?" It came from the ridge, Gerder's voice.

"Yes, Gerder," said Drake. "That Berry I got just now?"

"No, it was Kirkhoot," said Gerder. "He was the only one of Hazard's bunch that would stick with us. You blew Jack Berry's legs off with that shotgun back in Tucson. I'll make a deal with you, Drake."

"Any deal you make will *have* to be with me, now," said Drake. "Midge hasn't got the deed to this quarter section; she never did have. Her father signed it over to Face Card Farrow, and it's mine, now."

There was a pause while Gerder digested that. "I'll give you fifteen thousand for it," he said finally.

"What about Hazard?"

"Hazard's out of it. He wouldn't dare buck you with that proof of his connection with the Corral Street fire in the marshal's hands. Hazard had himself appointed the girl's guardian to get his hands on that deed and keep P. R. from ruining the Tanque Verdes for cattle by diverting the water in Apache Gap. Hazard thought by having the girl around he'd find out what her father had done with the deed sooner or later. He was afraid to question her directly for fear she'd tell someone else what he was doing. I got fed up with the cat-and-mouse game and tried to force it from her that day she was out riding."

"You mean you wanted to get the deed before Hazard did and sell out to P. R.," said Drake. "The only reason you threw in with Hazard is so he wouldn't buck you on Corral Street."

"What does it matter? Hazard's out of

it now. Whether his connection with the fire comes out now or later, it doesn't matter. He's through in the Tanque Verdes. The T. C. A. will dump him out of the saddle as soon as they find out how he's been driving his cows. It's just you and me now, Drake. Fifteen thousand. Enough to set up a new Double Deuces for you."

"You'll have to go higher than that, Gerder," mocked Drake. "Did you think the P. R. hadn't already reached me? They offered me twenty thousand. Can you and Hazard meet that? I wouldn't take it if you could. I'm no girl, to treat the way you treated Midge, Gerder. It'll be a little different trying to take that deed off me. Why don't you come and get it, Gerder? That's the only deal you can make with me."

DRAKE realized he had been talking a long time without any answer, and he wondered if Gerder hadn't kept the palaver going to cover something. There was only one way they could approach him without exposing themselves. The shack was in a cuplike hollow, with Cochise Ridge taking a half-circle curve above it in the front. One end of the curve was across the level compound from Drake, but the near end overlooked the corral. With a swift decision, he got to his hands and knees, slinging the cartridge belt over his shoulder, and began crawling down the dilapidated backpole fence to the rising ground. There was a shot from across the way; lead kicked dirt into his face. But that did not mean someone else wasn't working down the other side of the ridge toward him.

He crouched behind the last pole of the corral, then shoved his leg out and drew it back. The shot came from the ridge across the compound and he fired between the bars at the flash. Then he threw himself in a run up the slope toward the ridgetop on this side, reloading as he ran, and his shot had held the man over there down long enough so that Drake was almost at the crest before the firing began again. He stumbled to the top and threw himself across the talus to roll into a pocket on the opposite side, out of sight of the shack. He did not know he had been hit till he tried to rise, and his leg went out from beneath him. He felt the sob begin way down in his throat, and it was more anger than pain, and he stopped it before there was any sound. Then he began to crawl along the ridge. There was growth here, and the air was heavy with the scent of night-blooming cactus, its white flowers forming large pale splotches all down the slope on this side of the very lip of the cliff that formed the sheer side of Apache Gap.

Drake sank into the deep Texas crab behind a screening clump of barrel cactus, and this was where it would be. He had jammed a fresh load into the breech, and he shoved the bolt home slowly, silently. He knew the man across the compound had been covering someone's movement over this way, and it would not be long. The pain of his leg began to intensify, and he found himself gritting his teeth. Then it was the noise. Not much at first. Not enough to attract a man, unless he had been expecting it, or waiting. Drake had been waiting. He licked his finger and ran it over the sight at the end of his rifle, and the sight gleamed wetly in the moonlight. The barrel cactus was not enough to hide him. Whoever was coming around the curve of that ridge would see him about the same time he saw them. He wished he could stand for this, somehow. He drew himself to a sitting position, propping the gun across his knees. His last thought was of Midge. At least they would hound her no longer.

"All right, Gerder," he said.

But Gerder had already seen him. The man stiffened there atop the ridge as his gun hammered, and the lead clattered through the barrel cactus and slammed through the wooden stock of the Springfield with stunning force, knocking the gun up, and it was all Drake could do to keep his finger from pulling the trigger spasmodically that way. Gerder jumped down the slope, throwing down to fire again. Drake jerked the Springfield back into line, and for that instant, the wet front sight gleamed across the dark bulk of Gerder's belly, and Drake squeezed the trigger.

He did not see Gerder take the bullet. All he saw was the man continued to crash down the slope in that headlong run, and his instincts would not wait for more, turning him spasmodically to the noise

above and behind him. His twisting motion threw him on his side with rifle pointed directly up at Italy, who had just risen on the ridge above, a six-gun up by his head to throw down on Drake. Italy stood that way for a long, rigid moment. Then he dropped the six-gun down his back, moving the arm he held in a white sling.

"You winged me back in Tucson, shooting me off the horse," he said. "I guess that's enough."

"Kick your six-gun down here," said Drake, and when the man complied, he snapped open the breech of his rifle, and the hot, fired shell popped out. "Didn't you ever see a single-shot Springfield?"

ITALY made a small, frustrated movement toward him, but Drake had already gotten the six-gun. He turned to see what had happened to Gerder; the man was not in sight. Italy spoke finally, and the frustration was in his voice.

"Bart ran right on down the slope and off the cliff with your slug in his belly. I guess the P. R. will find him when they divert Rio Caballo."

"The P. R. isn't going to divert Rio Caballo," said Drake. "Any more of you?"

"The sheriff. I had to hold him on the other side while I was trying to keep you by the corral so Gerder could work above you over here."

"George," shouted Drake, "are you going to come out now, or will I have to get you?"

In a moment the sheriff came stumbling down the ridge, "I'm not in this Drake. I didn't know it was like this. Hazard only told me he was after you because you took Midge. When I found out what Gerder was really after, I tried to stop him. They—"

"I know, George," said Drake, wearily. "I know. But now Gerder's out of it, and maybe Tucson will settle down a bit and you and Petrie and a lot of other fence-sitters can come down and have a beer with your friends again. Now help me back to the shack. I got a packet in the leg."

The girl ran from the cabin as soon as she saw them helping Drake down the slope. Binder shouted at them as they carried Drake toward the door.

"Now you've killed all the others, maybe you can get around to me. Swear if I have to stand this one minute longer, I'll blow my top."

"You aren't going to die any more than I am," groaned Drake. "Sheriff's going to get the horses and we'll take you back to town. I've seen men with more lead in them than you live to a ripe old age."

"Damn you, Drake." Binder sucked in a resigned breath. "How about the deed? The girl found it on Colorado, along with some other papers."

"It's still not for sale," said Drake. "I'm going to run cattle in the Tanque Verdes and I want water for them. Hazard had the right idea about that, but he was pulling his cards from a cold deck. My cards aren't marked, and they're laying face up on the table."

"P. R. is a mighty big organization—"

"You told me that once," said Drake.

"As I said, P. R. is a mighty big organization. But I been with them a long time. They'll take my judgment on things. When I saw you walk out of Tucson with that shotgun, I figured you were going to be a hard man to beat. When I heard how Gerder burnt down your house and you still didn't quit, I figured you were going to be almost impossible to beat. When I saw you go out and take Gerder tonight, I knew you couldn't be beat. Think I'll wire P. R. they better start surveying that other route around the Tanque Verdes."

Kennedy had paused in the door before going to get the horses. "Looks like your fighting days are about over, then Drake. All that's left is getting a guardian for the girl. I don't guess Petrie will put up a fuss about that now that Hazard's taking the trail out."

"It won't be necessary," said Drake.

"How's that?"

Drake was looking at Midge, and it was more for her than anybody else when he said, "A girl doesn't exactly need a guardian when she has a husband, does she?" and he saw the answer in her eyes.

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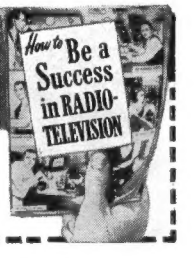

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